



Technology Is Not the Great Equalizer: A Feminist Perspective on the Digital Economy

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Abstract

This article looks beyond the hype around the digital economy's potential to create gender justice by busting the myths and illustrating the facts, as well as proposing holistic solutions. It is mainly an adaptation of the webinar 'Does the digital economy promote women's rights? Unpacking the Myths!'. In its essence, it is a call for action to create and shape technology that breaks with traditional gender biases, creating digital justice and opportunities for the many not the few in a world that is increasingly restructured and unequal.

Keywords Gender justice · Digital justice · Digital economy · Technology · Feminist economics · Algorithms

New technology has been historically sold to the public as a *game changer* that will improve people's lives; a slogan championed not just by the private sector but by policy makers too. The advent of the internet is no exception. In particular, the internet has been introduced to debates on gender equality as a 'women friendly' technology that can allow them to participate in the economy without upsetting the traditionally gendered expectation of 'work-life balance'. All women can finally become entrepreneurs, if they so desire. This fable does not hold true for any gender, let alone women. What is being proposed in actuality is a continuation of the neoliberal economy that has been increasing the gap of inequality in a constant progression, driven lately by the same digital economy that is being advertised as a solution to the problem it is aggravating. A webinar organized late September 2019 explored these issues. 'Does the digital economy promote women's rights? Unpacking the Myths!' webinar¹ was organized by the Friedrich Eber Stiftung (FES) in the context of 'The Future is Feminist' project,² in collaboration with the Gender and Trade Coalition³ and WIDE+.⁴ This article is mainly an adaptation of the presentations and commentaries made during the event.

Through a feminist exploration, we look at three compound dimensions that deconstruct the main discourse on the status and potential of the digital economy in empowering women that are far too often ignored by mainstream public policy discourse.

Economic Principles

Before addressing the digital economy, Scheaffer Okore⁵ critiques the very economic principles of the global system to which we are all subject. Feminist economics is a well-established tradition that refutes the principle of economics as a rational science. Instead, feminists argue that it

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¹ <https://wideplus.org/2019/09/20/recording-available-of-webinar-does-the-digital-economy-promote-womens-rights-unpacking-the-myths>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

² <https://www.fes.de/en/themenportal-gender-jugend-senioren/gender/translate-to-english-the-future-is-feminist>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

³ The Gender and Trade Coalition is a global feminist alliance for trade justice confronting the co-optation of women's rights as a means for further liberalization, and increasing consciousness, capacity, research, and advocacy for equitable policy alternatives.

⁴ WIDE+ is a European network of associations and activists that fights for women's rights, as part of a larger struggle for social justice, sustainable livelihoods and human rights. <https://wideplus.org/>.

⁵ Scheaffer Okore, Vice Chair of the Ukweli Party, Kenya.



is ‘a reflection of the psychology of human behaviour and decision making ... a field that reflects the values, interests and priorities of those with power.’⁶ Undoubtedly, feminist economics is inclusive of women’s role in the economy, while mainstream economics ignores their contribution completely, leading to a skewed view of reality that does not acknowledge all priorities in society and thus perpetuating inequalities rather than tackling them. Any discourse on economics must therefore address the systemic neglect of women’s inputs and needs as economic agents.

Furthermore, mainstream economic analysis tends to focus on the micro and macro levels, ignoring the meso and meta levels. Meso-economics represents the role of institutions such as political parties, religion and courts in the economy, and meta-economics denotes the economy as an interactive, holistic, complex system. In order to understand fully how women are interacting in the economy and how they are affected by policy, the analysis must therefore include their status across all of these levels.

On the micro level, we must study how women work and participate in the economy and which conditions affect them. On the macro level, we need to look at how fiscal, monetary, trade and investment policies influence women’s businesses and working conditions, as well as how Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reflects women’s productivity and input. The meso level allows us to understand barriers that women may face in registering a business, or how politics and religion affect women’s role in participating actively in the market. Through the meta level we can analyze how women live on a daily basis, their needs and priorities to be able to work and manage their businesses and how their gendered, multiple roles in society affect that. Okore gives an illustrative example of a woman who sells a product by the roadside who has been given capital to start or expand her business. It is important to acknowledge several facts, such as that a quarter of her capital goes to sustaining the environment she comes from, and the time and effort it takes her to fulfil her daily activities: preparing herself and her children for the day, looking after her family depending on its size and characteristics, the distance she travels to collect water, the challenges she faces while selling her products on the road (people often are territorial and pick a feud as soon as a woman sets up to sell something by the roadside), etc.

The digital economy has created new opportunities for women, from digital data that can be used to inform and improve development processes, to advancing economic and social outcomes, to becoming a force for innovation.

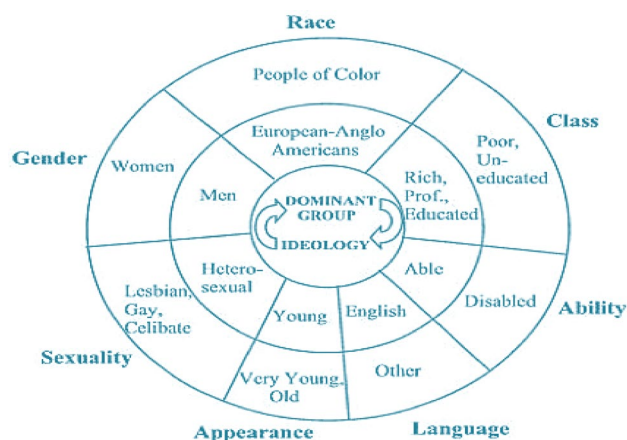


Fig. 1 Segmentation of the digital economy population

‘Digital platforms facilitate transactions and networking as well as information exchange. Transformation of all sectors and markets through digitalization can foster the production of higher quality goods and services at reduced costs. Digitization is transforming value chains in different ways and opening up new channels for value addition and broader structural change,’ notes Okore.

However, the digital economy is not inclusive for the great majority of women. It remains highly segmented, especially in Africa as per Fig. 1.

Segmentation by race includes xenophobia that conditions what is said and how it is said. Class, social and economic power determines who has access to technology and how it is used. Language remains a barrier for many as not everyone speaks world languages (English, French, etc.)—where do the rural women who speak only local languages fit in in the digital world? Appearance, including age, factors into the intergenerational differences in the ability to use new technology. At times sexuality can also limit how women can engage; not finding space or facing discrimination are common issues. Gender favours men in the digital economy especially in economies of scale, thus women find themselves marginalized and not represented adequately. This is a picture of how women are segmented online. Clearly, it does not represent a reality that empowers the majority of women.

There is clearly a need for a new approach for digitalization that breaks with the old paradigms of gender inequality. ‘Women must be cognizant of what offline trade already looks like with its disparities and understand that digitization has the potential to exacerbate these disparities,’ concludes Okore, emphasizing that a range of issues in the digital economy, just like the traditional one, ‘must be addressed accordingly within *gender equal & feminist lenses* in order for digital commerce to serve vulnerable women better.’

⁶ Scheaffer Okore ‘Does the digital economy promote women’s rights? Unpacking the myths!’ <https://wideplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Unpacking-digital-economy.pptx>. Accessed 8 October 2019.



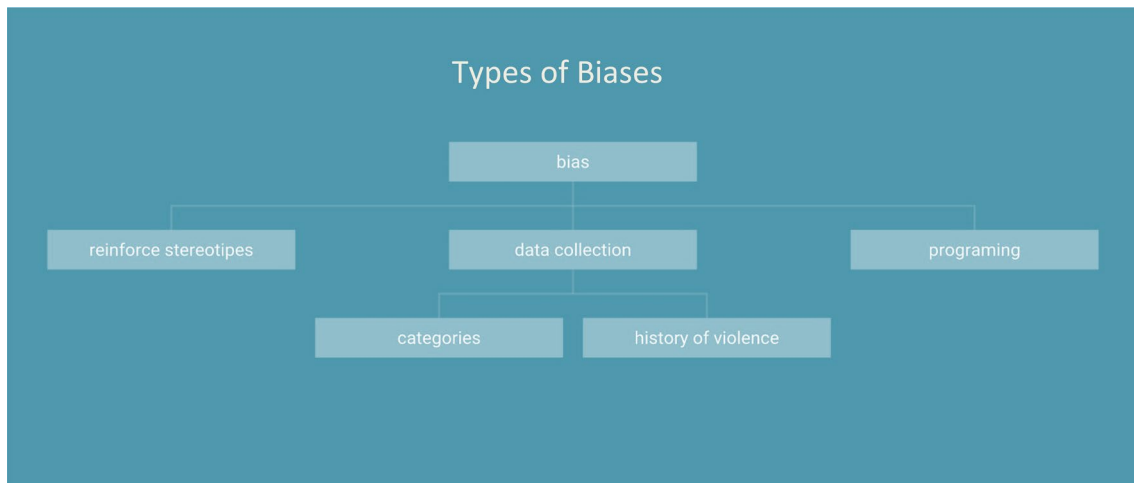


Fig. 2 Types of biases in technology

Technology Creation

Much like economic liberalization and globalization, the digitized economy is not the same for everyone. Sofia Scasserra⁷ explores⁸ some of the common myths surrounding women in the economy and the transformational potential of e-commerce: tech is gender neutral and is the great equalizer; women do not have to choose between work and raising children because with the digital economy they can work from home remotely; in the years to come most jobs will be in the care economy as people's lifespans increase, which is a great opportunity for women because it is where they tend to be mostly employed; entrepreneurship and e-commerce will empower women by allowing them to create their own business and access global markets.

Promoting remote employment as an empowering economic solution for women at home essentially solidifies the gender bias towards women. Giving women the opportunity to work from home does not solve the issue of having two jobs: taking care of children and the household in addition to official work in the market economy. It stereotypes and consolidates women's role as carers. 'It's a secret way of saying 'you need to stay at home and take care of the kids', and have a job that has less rights,' says Scasserra. Women will not benefit from health insurance, vacation allowance or pension rights under this model of labour. Instead they will have jobs that are precarious, just at home.

⁷ Sofia Scasserra, Researcher and Lecturer, World Labor Institute "Julio Godio", Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF), Argentina, and Economic Advisor FAECYS—Presidency UNI Global.

⁸ Sofia Scasserra 'Why Do Algorithms Treats Us Different?' <https://wideplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/sesgos-algoritmicos-1.pptx>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

The 'technology is gender neutral' argument has many holes in it. It is often claimed that women in the digital economy will receive equal pay to men, thus solving the gender pay gap because through remote employment often an employee's gender is unknown (e.g. Amazon's mechanical jobs or the gig economy). However, studies show that this is not true: Women Uber drivers tend to earn 7% less than men due to their performance which suffers because they are often rated more harshly by gender biased customers, and also due to their commitments as carers.⁹ Although the care economy is promoted as the future opportunity for women specifically, jobs in the care economy are low paid, and the real growth industry with high paying salaries is found in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields where women are still a minority. Thus, as Scasserra notes, the gender gap is likely to grow.

'A washing machine is gender neutral, it doesn't care if it's turned on by a man or a woman, but we cannot say that a washing machine is the great equalizer. So that shows that technology isn't going to be the great equalizer per se. What the digital economy is going to do is to translate inequality into the digital world. We cannot say that technology by itself—only just promoting the digital economy—is going to change things. We need to do something else,' affirms Scasserra.

Algorithms are presented as gender neutral, but they too reflect existing biases through data collection as illustrated in Fig. 2. *Data collection* needs to be culture sensitive though most data is collected by Big Tech—mostly located in the U.S. and Europe—in a centralized manner that does not reflect cultural difference. There is also a reinforcement of

⁹ <https://fortune.com/2018/02/06/uber-gender-pay-gap-study>. Accessed 8 October 2019.



a *history of violence*. For example, if a company wants to collect data on its successful employees, the profile chosen will most likely be that of a white male because of existing gender inequalities in society that data creators do not take into account. Data collection is thus discriminatory through the very process of its creation which then feeds into algorithms, which again in itself are biased by their *programming*. Those responsible for programming the algorithms are predominantly companies in the U.S. and Europe with men as programmers—Google’s global workforce is only 30% women above all, we must be fully aware that technology *reinforces stereotypes* found in society and unless stereotypes are addressed on a policy level they will continue to exist. There are no solutions to technological biases as they are without changing the system and creating tools to audit and control algorithms that are being constructed.

Public Policy

Global public policy is the main actor responsible for restructuring the economy and the livelihoods of women. It has been argued that public policy discourse on women’s empowerment has been influenced by the hype of the potential of technology—this dynamic has been observed particularly following the 2017 Joint Declaration on Trade and Women’s Empowerment by members of the World Trade Organization (WTO). As Nandini Chami¹⁰ tells us in her presentation,¹¹ the emphasis of the declaration is on ‘how the moment for women’s entrepreneurial freedom is finally here with the digital revolution’ and it is the prescribed pathway for ‘effective integration of women’s MSMEs [Medium Small and Micro Enterprises] into the digital marketplace and global value chains of the digital economy.’ Essentially, this proposes that focusing on effective free trade so that products can move freely across borders will empower women and change their status in developing countries. Chami quotes Jack Ma during the 2018 WTO Forum, Alibaba Chairman at that time, as the epitome of the prevailing sentiment regarding digital liberalization and its positive effects for women: ‘Inclusive digital trade is about leveraging the digital opportunity for small businesses, women, young people, especially those in developing countries... we need to make trade rules easier and simpler. We need to

protect trade, not trade protectionism. This means more free trade, and more globalization.’

The constant promotion of e-trade benefits for women has become a tiresome argument akin to ones in traditional neo-liberal trade circles which feminist critics have consistently debunked. Chami illustrates how ‘the rules of e-commerce are stacked against women.’ Just like in the case of non-digital trade, the problem with e-commerce is structural. Chami presents two dimensions to the problem: the rules of the unregulated multinational platforms, and the lack of a national policy to protect female-led MSMEs.

Digital trade is essentially controlled by a few global companies, such as Alibaba and Amazon, and access to these platforms is exclusionary and structured against marginal people/MSMEs. Barriers such as membership fees and commission rates tend to exclude the less economically empowered. Sellers are not treated equally (e.g. Amazon Fulfilled conditionalities) whereby some are offered services that are not offered to others. Conditions to such services often cannot be met by MSMEs. This then influences the visibility of products. In addition, the algorithmic ranking metrics (e.g. Buy Back algorithm) are non-transparent and opaque, so sellers cannot fully understand how they are being measured. Given this, it would seem that those who are more economically empowered are those who benefit the most, and the most vulnerable are once again marginalized.

A solution to reverse the effects of this structural inequality would be through the formulation of national policies that mitigate these issues, but what is happening instead is a deepening of these structures on the national level. This is why the call for ‘technological sovereignty’ has been taking place in many parts of the world. Chami considers it as a diminishing of the policy space, where: ‘plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce led by US, EU and Japan take away policy space to build a gender-inclusive e-commerce marketplace grounded in a public utility approach, because of prohibition on mandatory access to/disclosure of source code/algorithms; prohibition on conditionalities related to location of computing facilities; and demand for completely unrestricted cross-border transfers of data.’ Rightfully, she notes that the need for digital sovereignty must be in concomitance with a formulation of a global treaty for digital rights to protect privacy and other rights from any governmental breach.

To gain a better understanding of the effects of the digital economy on women in the Global South, Chami gives the example of women in Asia and Africa who are traditionally the largest producers of food. The digital restructuring of agriculture is corporatizing farming on a new level, e.g. Alibaba acquired 12,000 hectares in New Zealand for dairy farming. This brings to mind the 1980s and 1990s when what was known formerly as Monsanto corporatized agriculture with questionable results for farmers and

¹⁰ Nandini Chami, Digital Justice Project—a collaborative research and advocacy initiative of DAWN and IT for Change.

¹¹ Nandini Chami ‘Are WTO debates on gender and e-commerce working for women’s empowerment? What needs to shift?’ Justice Project of DAWN and IT for Change, September 2019. <https://widepl.us.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Digital-Justice-Project-FES-Webinar-September-2019.pdf>. Accessed 8 October 2019.



agriculture. E-commerce companies are penetrating the agricultural value chain from end to end—new ‘farm to fork models’—affecting food sovereignty and women farmers’ sustainable livelihoods. In Africa, venture capital companies and perilous agricultural companies such as Syngenta are investing in creating e-commerce platforms solutions for information services, credit and input advisories. This raises a grave concern, because a digital platform for smallholders that is created by large companies driven by private capital logic, which in theory is of public service, will only benefit corporations and not women MSMEs. What is needed are platforms that benefit the public interest.

Trade policy and negotiations continue on the path of further deregulation, ignoring the restructuring of the economy through deeper penetration by e-commerce transnational corporations and the effects that it will bring on national economies and the most vulnerable in society. For example, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a proposed plurilateral free trade agreement between mostly Asian countries, contains a clause named ‘national treatment’ which requires countries not to discriminate against foreign companies in favour of national ones. In the case of agriculture, historically many countries have upheld laws that prevent foreign companies from acquiring land in order to protect local farmers. Today, e-commerce companies are acquiring land moving up the agricultural chain in the Asia Pacific region; if trade terms such as ‘national treatment’ are approved and countries lose the power to regulate their own local markets, e-commerce companies will have the capacity to buy unlimited land, overpowering small farmers. By now we have learned what the consequential inequalities born with these patterns are.

Similarly, agreements that disempower governments from asserting their rights over the data of their citizens create models that are not based on local economies and livelihoods, as all the data running through the platforms of transnational digital corporations related to women’s agricultural practices will be expropriated and the solutions produced will not be for public service but for corporations interest, thus marginalizing women further.

Can the Digital Economy Effectively Empower Women?

Technology is known to be one of the drivers of income inequality and the digital revolution is no exception.¹² The effect is magnified on women as they enter the digital economy already disadvantaged. The injustice and disparities

they endure in every aspect of their lives are transported into the digital economy. To change this paradigm, the panellists proposed different modes of actions: changing the current status of women in society within the different dimensions they interact with to achieve gender justice, creating technology that is gender sensitive and corrects for biases, and acting on a national and global level to change public policies, especially that of trade.

As several speakers remarked, women’s role as carers is the main obstacle to their effective participation in public life. Social division of unpaid work at home is the most important item for any feminist agenda because that is what generates inequality from the very beginning. This translates into women’s lack of adequate representation in society, politics, markets, academia and other spaces that shape human lives, ensuring the persistence of their marginalization. Women must be present at the table and not just as tokenistic representation or as a statistic.

In order to create such change, Okore presents some specific areas that need our attention, starting from *unpaid work*. Women spend on average two to ten times more than men on unpaid work and domestic and care work¹³; hence the value of unpaid care and domestic work must be recognized through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies. More importantly, shared responsibility within the household and the family needs to be adequately and effectively promoted. *Decent work* should not be a privilege. It is necessary for sustained economic growth and technological innovation. Encouraging women’s participation outside the home in all spheres including entrepreneurship and through job creation, in conjunction with effective measures to eradicate forced labour, slavery and human trafficking, are all key in overcoming current inequalities. In order to reduce social and economic vulnerabilities *social protection rights* must be ensured through mechanisms that provide individuals and families, especially the poor and vulnerable, to cope with crises and shocks, find jobs, invest in the health and education of their children, and protect the aging population. It is true for all countries, but especially developing ones, that *tax justice* is essential to create sustainable development. A holistic approach to tax policy that determines the best approaches to allocate public funds to address disparities and encourage sustainable growth is vital.

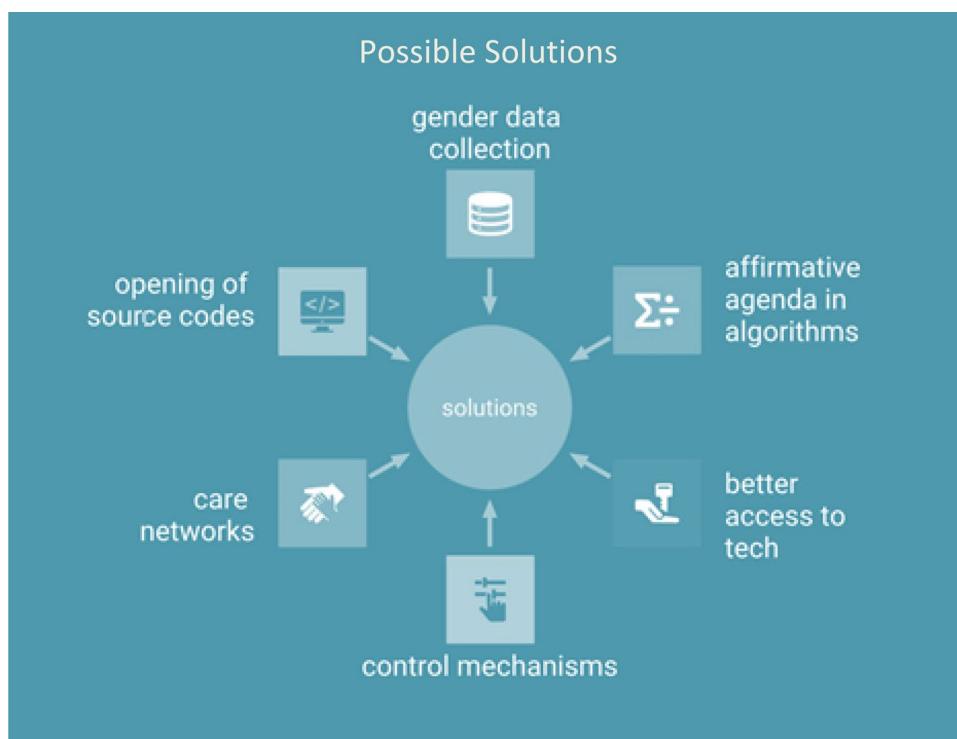
These fundamental changes are expanded further by Scasserra who explains that in order to avoid data collection and algorithm biases it is imperative to collect data with a gender perspective, as it is not enough that algorithms treat genders equally because women have a disadvantaged

¹² <https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/how-the-digital-economy-has-exacerbated-inequality-9726>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

¹³ https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf. Accessed 8 October 2019.



Fig. 3 Possible solutions to biases in technology



starting point. Thus, algorithms must be designed with that perspective in order to equalize the current status of gender imbalance in society as demonstrated in Fig. 3. Otherwise, inequality will be perpetuated in the digital world.

Possible Solutions

There is also a need for open source codes in order to build auditing systems that can correct algorithmic discrimination. Women need care networks in every community so they can engage on equal footing with men in the digital economy. They should not have the burden of taking care of the children and household on top of their paid job. Societies must have control mechanisms to overview and decide how technology is used. Companies are fashioning the digital and gig economy with little restrictions; this necessitates strong labour unions and more efficient democratic institutions. Access to technology is still a problem in many parts of the world. More than half of world population is offline, and the majority of those are women. Keeping in mind that it is not enough to have access, they also need to know how to use it to empower themselves. The digital world must make a commitment to an affirmative agenda in algorithmic analytics, meaning that a Google search for a term such as 'engineer' must give results showing five women and five men, with women results positioned first to correct for gender bias. Equal gender treatment is not enough; it perpetuates the inequality in an invisible manner.

Scasserra clarifies misconceptions about technology: 'Technology is not something that is given to us... Technology is constructed by human beings, it's constructed by us, by everyone. And there are many ways of constructing technology. There are open source code programmes, there's Wikipedia, there are many interesting projects that we should try to encourage, and invest in those technologies that are for everyone and not just a few. When we talk about technology, we need not discuss it only from the perspective of corporate power and the need to change it... We need a feminist movement that raises consciousness on women double work at home as carers, and outside the home in a paid job. Women need to make it clear that this not acceptable so women can participate in the economy including the digital one. Such a movement needs to make it a priority to challenge the current status of algorithms as explained. And finally, participate in the making of technology in a way that benefits everyone and steer away from profiting corporations. We need to change technology, not only by asking the government, but us as citizens, we also have power to create change.'

All these proposals necessitate women and society as a whole to act. Formulating suitable public policies remains an imperative pillar in creating needed sustainable change, which remains a challenging endeavour. As Chami deconstructs the dynamics of global policy and how it affects individual countries, she notes the disparity with which countries are treated when demanding amending rules. The rights of developing countries to regulate the digital



economy are always presented as legitimate, while that of developing countries is argued against and labeled as ‘trade protectionism.’

On the current status of negotiations, Chami explains that in 2019 more than 76 countries issued a joint statement on e-commerce. The idea is that since developing countries are opposing the proposals that will further entrench the interests of the platform companies of the U.S. and its allies and the interests of the dominant companies, they want to try to push more equitable rules through plurilateral negotiations at the WTO. However, under the WTO charter members cannot push rules through plurilateralism, so it is still not clear at this point how they will effectively make any binding changes. She presents a three point agenda for digital justice, gender justice and economic justice: ‘(1) Preserving the policy space of developing countries to set the pace of digital trade liberalization; (2) An international treaty on data governance that acknowledges jurisdictional sovereignty over data flows as an integral part of the right to development; (3) Digital public goods approach for women’s economic empowerment—public utility e-commerce platforms, with affirmative action to promote uptake by women’s entrepreneurs—seed funding and access to public data pools for inclusive innovation.’

Furthermore, Chami asks us to be aware of the new world order that is being constructed with plurilateral agreements creating a new oppressive and restrictive regime. Like RCEP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), or in its new avatar as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), among other trade policy proposals have the same e-commerce restrictions. Accordingly, Chami urges to act now to seize the ‘make it or break it’ momentum, because if the policy space to set rules on data flows and regulating digital transnational corporations is taken away then a gender unequal world will only consolidate further.

Chami highlights the need for inter-movement alliances and civil society mobilization against RCEP and similar proposals, such as the open letter Empowerment signed by more than 200 feminist organizations and their allies from around the world urging WTO member states to reject the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic.¹⁴ She elaborates further: ‘Women’s representation in trade economy policy setting must not be just tokenistic; and we need to stop thinking about digital technologies as instruments: framing the demand as access to technologies, but it’s not access to technologies that is really the problem. It is the access to the benefit to the digital intelligence and the fair

distribution of the value that is being created in the digital mode of capitalism. So as feminist when we frame our agenda, we need to go far more beyond the access and the use divide and ask for a share in this new paradigm. Alliances between gender justice activists, trade justice activists, and digital rights community is extremely important considering that historically the digital rights community has focused on civic political rights and only recently started addressing issues of social-economic rights and governance of data and AI. So, we need to insure the strengthening of this alliance and the cross-fertilization of the different communities within it.’

A Final Word

To put it in the most simplistic terms, women need to get busy outside the home. The consequences of lack of women’s participation in public spaces and shaping public discourses due to their role as unpaid carers has endless consequences for women and for the sustainability of society as a whole. As it was repeatedly mentioned, this is the main priority upon which everything else is built.

The inequality division, as we know, is not only between the Global South and North. There is a growing South in the North. The inequalities indexes are bleaker by each year passing. Though women have better access and resources in the North, they are far from achieving gender justice and the digital economy, for them as well, is propagating further injustice. Gender and digital justice in the North cannot but serve the Global South. The neoliberal structure, the economy of maximizing profits against all odds, and the belief in survival of the fittest cannot survive in a gender just system. The very trade policies being proposed today, relinquishing power and sovereignty of developing countries, would not exist. That is why women North–South and South–South alliances are determinant in creating change for justice.

The webinar touched on some environmental implications in the digital economy age, but a feminist agenda needs to have the issue at the heart of its call for action. As humanity faces one of the worst crises in its history, technology creation and expansion is exasperating the environmental crisis. Even if the same voices who tells us that the digital economy will bring equality to women, tell us that technology will fix the climate crisis. It is calculated that by 2025 the Internet and Communication Technology industry could consume up to one fifth of global energy, creating 3.5% of global emissions by 2020, and 14% by 2040.¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://apwld.org/press-release-164-womens-rights-groups-call-on-governments-to-reject-the-wto-declaration-on-womens-economic-empowerment/>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/dec/11/tsunami-of-data-could-consume-fifth-global-electricity-by-2025>. Accessed 8 October 2019.



As the panellists illustrated, the current structure of the economy and technology transfer the biases against women into the digital world. Perhaps it is time for women to transfer their knowledge of care for society and the environment into the creation of technology and restructuring of the economy to create a much needed revolution that empowers them, and as it is often the case when women are

empowered, create a more just and sustainable society and a healthier environment.

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