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Book

Feminist Futures of Work: Reimagining Labour in the Digital Economy

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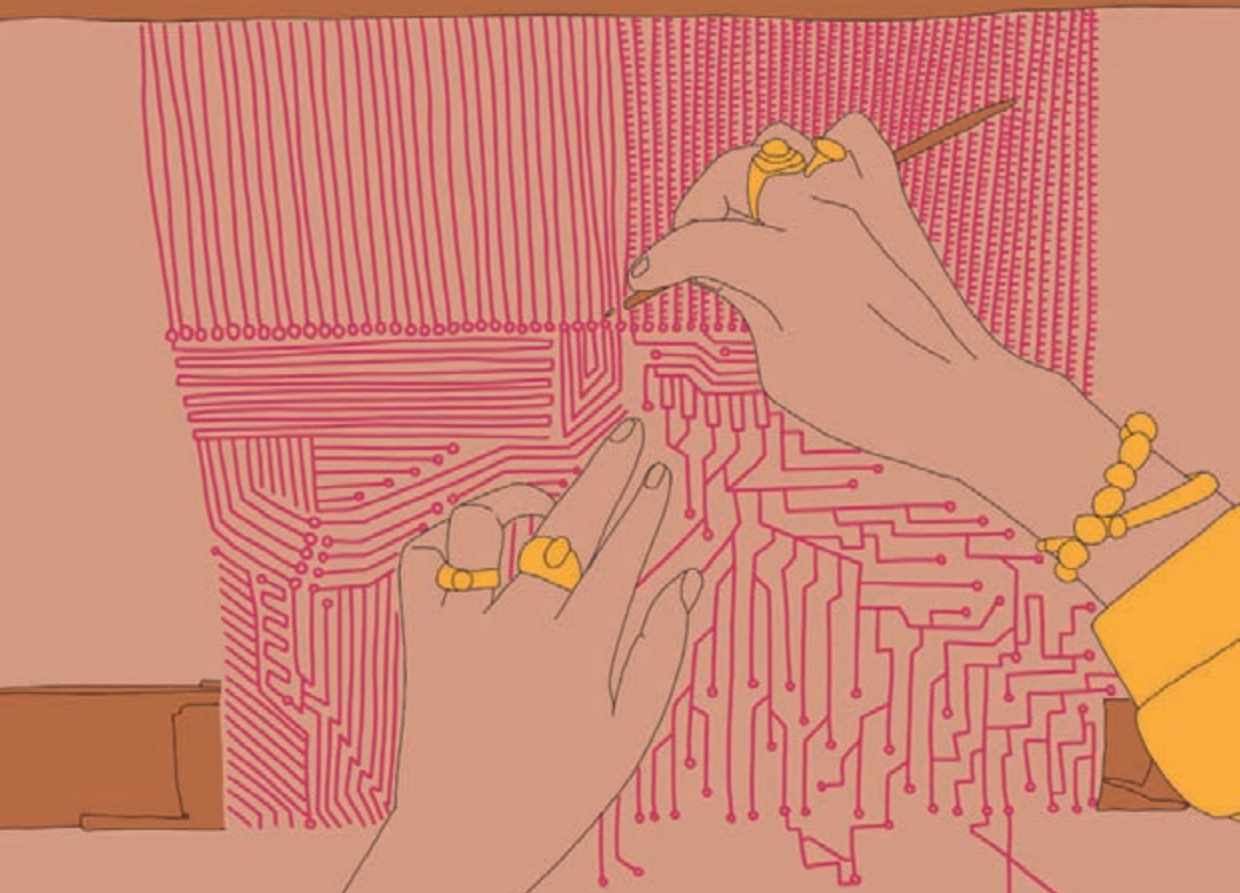
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DIGITAL STUDIES



Edited by Payal Arora, Usha Raman, and René König

Feminist Futures of Work

Reimagining Labour
in the Digital Economy

Amsterdam
University
Press

Feminist Futures of Work

Digital Studies

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Feminist Futures of Work

Reimagining Labour in the Digital Economy

*Edited by
Payal Arora,
Usha Raman, and
René König*

Amsterdam University Press

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This book project was born in the pandemic. As such, it has emerged from the everyday courage of numerous people and organizations in South Asia and beyond as they coped with the challenges and carved opportunities to make a living, find a voice, and fill a need. It started as a humble deliverable in the form of a blog series run by the three editors. Our goal was to get people from different worlds—academia, design, tech, business, and activism—to tap into their experiences and insights on the broad themes of the future of work and feminist approaches to design, development, and deployment of tech in the Global South. We were pleasantly surprised that this created a momentum and generated a digital community of sorts that grounded our work. This book is a testament to that community—all the authors in this book. We are grateful that these authors took the leap to engage with ideas, sectors, and perspectives outside their comfort zone. They have inspired us editors to continue our pursuits on stakeholder engagements across borders.

Two of the editors—Usha Raman and Payal Arora—were awarded funding by the Canadian grant agency, International Development Research Centre, for a future of work in The Global South Project right before the pandemic struck. The idea was to get out there in the field and engage with the numerous women workers in India and Bangladesh on how they leveraged digital and social networks to build opportunities in diverse sectors such as the artisanal, garment, construction, ride-hailing, and salon services. From these efforts, FemLab came about, which became not just a project home, but over these years, a feminist academic collective. This could not have been possible without the ongoing support of Gillian Dowie, our project manager at IDRC, as she worked with us to shape our deliverables, and recognized value in the ongoing blog series. We would also like to thank Arjan De Haan from IDRC for supporting us in the tail end of the project.

Our FemLab sector leaders have become a family of sorts—Sai Amulya Komarraju, Chinar Mehta, Pallavi Bansal, Shweta Mahendra Chandrashekar, and Upasana Bhattacharjee—and have done a remarkable job in pursuing organizations and workers in the field despite numerous obstacles including COVID-19-related challenges. It took enormous creativity to capture authentic perspectives in such a climate where people were pressed for time and energy. We are also deeply grateful to our partner organization Justice Adda, and specifically their founder Siddharth Peter de Souza and designer Siddhi Gupta for working with us continuously to translate our work into vivid and beautiful illustrations, animations, and toolkits, including

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Overall, we editors are proud of the FemLab community and are humbled by the sheer creativity, critical thinking, and care that has gone into this work, thus making this book a meaningful contribution to the world of work and feminist design.

Preface

Gillian Dowie

Canada's International Development Research Centre has a long history of supporting research on technology for development, starting from the ICT4D initiative looking at the ways that information and communications technologies (ICTs) can be used to improve learning, empower disenfranchised groups, generate income, and improve access to healthcare across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This began over twenty years ago and has evolved to reflect the growing importance of automation, digitization, and artificial intelligence in society and in the economy, including understanding the potential and risks for development and well-being.

The implications of technological advancements on the future of work have been of particular importance to IDRC, given our even longer history of supporting research to understand the structural and social barriers preventing women from full labour force participation that is decent and empowering. We continue to support research that identifies solutions to these barriers, while understanding that the nature of work is changing at a rapid pace worldwide and new challenges will arise that may, without the right policies and governance, further entrench these inequalities.

A particular question we began to ask several years ago was about the implications of the growing digital economy on women workers in LMICs, particularly platform-mediated jobs or the *gig economy*. In low-income contexts, women are more likely to be found in informal or family employment, have less access to care services that allow them to balance paid and unpaid care work, and have limited bargaining power. Would platform-mediated jobs challenge those realities, or simply replicate them in a new format?

We launched an initiative to try to bring these questions into focus across Asia, looking particularly at the experience of women from low-income communities and informal workers. We were looking to (i) deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that they face, (ii) identify the innovations, practices, and solutions that online platforms may use to create decent and inclusive work, and (iii) recommend the ways that online enterprises can contribute to governing changing labour practices by scaling solutions, or alternatively replicate traditional forms of exclusion. We identified four priority entry points for research: inclusion and representation in the digital labour market; care responsibilities and flexibility offered by online platforms; access to platforms and the nature of training and

education involved; and access to social protection, including leave, benefits, and insurance programmes.

We eventually selected five research projects across seven countries in South and Southeast Asia that asked different but complementary questions in response to our call, creating the *Women, Work and the Gig Economy* initiative. The proposal from the FemLab team, *Feminist Approaches to Labour Collectives*, offered an innovative approach that bridged traditional forms of work available to women, in garment and handicraft manufacturing, domestic work and other traditionally feminized roles, looking to understand the role of platforms and technology to help women organize, share experiences and grievances, access information about their rights at work, and communicate even to the top of supply chains about their conditions.

This proposal encompassed and expanded beyond the gig economy to understand representation, collectivization, and agency for women workers in a digitized world. The external reviewers of this proposal were equally excited by the research questions, and particularly by the methodology. One reviewer noted the storytelling approach; that the first-hand account from workers is where we will learn about the benefits and risks: “[...] in building this story through a multi-stakeholder interaction process it is possible to develop a shared vision of what is needed to make platforms more gender-inclusive.” This was ultimately the strength of the project. It went beyond traditional research to weave together the views of a diverse range of stakeholders from industry, development agencies, academics, designers, and workers to collectively brainstorm an approach to creating a better future of work.

The project began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and sought to adapt and continue their research throughout the lockdowns across India and Bangladesh in 2020 and 2021. This was a challenging time and called for adaptation in the project, but also was a period of significant acceleration of the digital economy, while exposing the lack of safety net for many workers. The FemLab team delivered meaningful research during this time, including on the nature of feminist labour organizing in a digital world and the potential impact for representation in global supply chains. They made information about working conditions and inclusive practices in the digital economy available to the public as well, influencing a change in the conversation that was gradually taking place when the pandemic demonstrated how precarious many jobs were.

This volume brings together a wide range of reflections and research on a feminist digital economy and captures the spirit of FemLab. Moving from the design of platforms for inclusion, to the governance of the digitally

driven economy, the power of networks in reshaping women's experience in the labour market, and laying out an ultimate vision for an inclusive and fair future of work, the FemLab team and their collaborators lay the foundation for the work that needs to be done.

Beyond the research itself, which is a significant contribution to the body of evidence on the future work, FemLab also supported the growth and career trajectory of countless young researchers from India, Bangladesh, and around the world, who benefitted from the chance to lead research activities, collaborate with thought leaders, including Payal Arora and Usha Raman, the co-founders of FemLab, and publish their work.

IDRC is proud to have seeded the FemLab network, which will grow well past this project, and will use the evidence they have produced to inform future research directions in our effort to build a more inclusive and sustainable world. This volume will also be a useful tool within academic settings, for students and professors, and for the wide range of policy, legal, feminist advocacy, and worker networks looking for a more inclusive way forward in the economy.

Introduction

The Tangled Web of Women in Work: A Feminist Account

Usha Raman, Payal Arora, & René König

Abstract

This book offers a feminist account for women's work experiences and negotiations in the Global South. Drawing on experiences and ideas from diverse locations—industry, civil society, academia, and activism, among others—the chapters in the book share a common purpose: to unpack the notions of work, fairness, and inclusion as they relate to gendered futures of work. This chapter provides an overview of the book and makes the case for FemWork.

Keywords: work, worker, women, networks, collectivization, Global South

The Tangled Web of Women in Work: A Feminist Account

One of the great paradoxes of our times is that even as women become more educated and economies grow, their participation in the workforce drops. This drop has been most keenly experienced in emerging economies. In India, for instance, the women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) dropped by almost 23 percentage points between 2004–5 to 2020–21.¹ While part of this fall may be attributed to the global economic downturn in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reasons are more complex, revealing as much about social and cultural norms as it does about the material realities at the supply end of the value chain. The past decade has seen a burgeoning of interest in the broad questions around women and work; apart from the continuing struggle to recognize the economic value of home-making and domestic care work, there is a growing awareness of the many nuances that

1 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

shape the definitions and dynamics of women's work, whether it is done in the home or outside, in the fields or on the factory floor, and how it moves through the market at local and global scales.

In the South Asian context, the decrease in women's participation in the workforce has been found to vary according to the type of work and a range of sociocultural and demographic variables (Najeeb, Morales and Lopez-Acevedo 2020). However, there is also a strain of scholarship that contests the dominant narrative that women's participation is falling because of increasing household income and conservative social norms (while acknowledging these) and instead point to the need to create jobs that not only attract women to the labour force but retain them (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019; Deshpande and Singh 2021). Another issue is that of counting—or accounting for—women's work, which is often invisible or is subsumed into the household income in sectors such as farming or other traditional occupations including artisanal work, quite apart from the economic value of home-making (Kalpana 2016; Singh and Pattanaik 2020).

There are then two important directions in which we need to think, when it comes to the world of work in relation to women. The first is concerned with the nature of the labour market and the affordances of labour design (which we may also think of as platform design, though not limited to technological platforms) that encourage or discourage women workers. The second revolves around the nature of work and its valuation in the market and in society. The many questions arising within these two broad areas, and the possible answers they may yield, can allow us to build an intelligible patchwork that can inform both policy and practice, as well as offer input to the material infrastructures of *work-place* and *work-form*. For many years, the discourse of social justice has included the notion of fair work as the basis of fair trade, emphasizing the need for economic actors to facilitate transparency around working conditions and redressal mechanisms. While these issues have received attention mostly in relation to the gig economy and digital platform work,² the underlying principles remain equally important in traditional economic sectors as well.

Work-place considerations can range from the physical structure of the factory or shop floor to the laws and provisions that secure workers' rights in various sectors. In the digital era, this would include the design of platforms for gig work as also the education and sensitization of workers and employers around the evolving nature of rights and responsibilities in the new economy. It would involve the re-imagination of the role of the state and

2 <https://fair.work/en/fw/homepage>

other economic actors in ensuring safety and security, and the creation of structures that foster not only productivity but also wellness and community. It would also include the recognition of places where unorganized workers engage in labour—the home, the street, the homes of others.

Work-form considerations might include a reimagination of both work and worker. Work that is done in places that have not been traditionally considered locations of productive labour—such as the home—must then be counted within the economy. Whether done by hand (as in artisanal crafts) or by the heart (affective labour, physical and emotional care work), they are recognized and valued in economic, social, cultural, and psychological terms.

Feminism has always been preoccupied with work; the early demands of the women's movement had to do with better working conditions and fairer wages, and in some contexts, even the right to work outside the home. But one might argue that those early demands were still predicated on the structures of work as defined within patriarchal norms. Over the years, feminists have argued for a shift in the terms of engagement, a reconceptualization of the very understanding of “productive” labour, expanding classical Marxist notions of use and exchange value as they operate within a capitalist system. Labour that occurs within the home, mostly done by women, that creates the context and support for other forms of work done outside the home, has only recently been recognized as productive, and worthy of valuing in economic terms. However, feminist struggles have varied across the globe, their differential resistances responding to the specific ways in which patriarchal values have structured contexts, and thus thinking about women workers in the Global South and elsewhere, requires that we pay heed to these nuances.

Viewing both work-place and work-form through the lens of gender allows us to discern the details of lived experience that must then inform decisions about the future of work. Notwithstanding the drop in the numbers of visible women in the labour force, the reality is that most women work, albeit in the informal sector, where numbers are fuzzy and unreliable (Krishnan 2020). While informality can be a driver of employment opportunities, it also creates the conditions for exploitation and precarity, and this tends to be more pronounced in the case of women workers. In spaces of policy and design, both of which structure work-place and form (in liberating and constraining ways), there is little consideration of the woman at the very end of the value chain. What are the specific material and affective conditions of her work? How might design—of technology, spaces, environments—create more favourable conditions on the supply side of labour that encourage women not only to enter the workforce but remain within it? What feminist values

might inform the transactions at various stages of the value chain so that work can be fair, dignified, and perhaps even fulfilling? How would these feminist values then allow us to reimagine a more inclusive, empathetic, caring value chain that listens to those at every level, but perhaps more sensitively, to those who hold the most vulnerable positions in that chain?

These then are the preoccupations that undergird the messy, ambitious collaboration that has resulted in this book. Drawing on experiences and ideas from diverse locations—industry, civil society, academia, and activism, among others—the chapters in the book share a common purpose: to unpack the notions of work, fairness, and inclusion as they relate to gendered futures of work. We have sought to find common ground across typically siloed professions: academics approaching work through lenses of social justice, economics, or collectivization; gender and women's studies scholars attempting to document the multi-layered lives of labour; activists helping mobilize women and nurture emergent identities; policy advocates drawing on data to push change; dreamers who envision a world built on principles of equity; technology designers who believe that the digital can truly make the world flatter; and social entrepreneurs who seek to innovate in both form and function.

The contributors to the volume straddle several fields of expertise, and employ different vocabularies, often speaking in cadences that do not match, defying what may be seen as the oppressive grid of academic form, and breaking the disciplining boundaries of scholarly fields to find common ground. There are empirically grounded analyses and experience-based insights, keen observational reflections and musings that draw from years of engaging with policy and governance in different fields. It is a collection that is motley by design, offering a patchwork of ideas from present practice that together provide the ground for rethinking the future of work.

To imagine feminist—or in other words, inclusive—futures of work requires us to see, think, and feel from the perspective of those who have been historically marginalized, across geographies. We therefore deliberately move away from dichotomies of the West and the Rest, or Global North and South, to argue that the gendered conditions that produce precarity, informality, or other oppressions related to work are both specific and universal. If technologies designed in the West are insensitive to the needs of those elsewhere, they are equally insensitive to non-dominant groups everywhere. If automation leads to deskilling and precarity in the Global South, they do so in the North as well. Drawing the contours of a concept from locations considered peripheral can make it more inclusive and more broadly applicable than designing from the narrow view of the centre.

Feminist thinking also requires us to be comfortable with uncertainty and to recognize the flexible and permeable nature of boundaries, a way of approaching life that is both contingent and responsive to context, while attending to the resonances and commonalities that can help build networks of solidarity. Such solidarities serve not only as mechanisms of resistance, but also of negotiation, learning, support, and care. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many of the fault lines in the global economy that showed the deep connections between international supply chains and local markets. It offered us an opportunity to rethink how work could and should be thought about and valued within a broader framework of human rights, about the need to spread responsibility for social security in a sustainable manner.

The book grew out of an inquiry, supported by IDRC,³ into five sectors in India and Bangladesh that employed large numbers of women workers, prompted initially by a curiosity about the nature of work and women's communicative ecologies. These sectors were construction, sanitation, home-based artisanal work, platform-based salon work, and app-based ride-hailing. While each of these sectors is distinct in terms of hiring patterns, seasonal shifts in work availability, and the nature of the work itself, they all share to some extent the characteristics of precarity and ambiguity of contracts and employer obligations, and above all, an insensitivity to women's worlds. The gig economy is normally thought of in terms of technology and platformization, but women have always worked in gig mode, hiring themselves out by the hour (sanitation and construction) and by the task (in artisanal work, salon, and ride-hailing). As we engaged with the workers themselves and with a range of other stakeholders across these sectors and in spaces of technology design, policy, and advocacy, we realized that work lives were deeply entangled with a range of other issues, ranging from local politics to state and national labour policies, to the socio-cultural dynamics of caste, religion, and community.

As the digital permeates into all sectors of the economy, from ordering and transacting work, managing compensation for labour to communicating with client, contractor, and co-worker, it also becomes a necessary dimension to the future of work. Some might argue that the future of work is nothing if not technologically mediated, and while its importance is undeniable, it is equally important to recognize those in the shadows of the digital. These

3 See <https://femlab.co> for more information. The project, formally titled "Organizing Digitally: Opportunities for Collectivization among Informal Women Workers in South Asia" drew on in-depth interviews with women workers and other stakeholders across these sectors over two years, from January 2020 to March 2022. All sectors were studied in India, while in Bangladesh, the garment industry was the focus of our attention.

may be artisans, city sweepers, or domestic workers whose everyday lives are marked by the absence of direct access to either devices or the internet, but whose work is no less shaped by the forces of digitization. In this volume, the presence of the digital is noted as channel and network, as materially proximal and aspirationally (even somewhat mythically) distant, as an opportunity to expand imaginations of work and as a surveillant system that can be negotiated with.

The book focuses on the core concerns of what we have dubbed the FemLab project but draws a much wider web that reflects the intersecting stakeholder groups that are engaged with these issues. The chapters in this book are grouped under four themes that reflect this approach to the futures of work.

Design

Building on the assumption that infrastructures—digital and physical—can both constrain and afford fair conditions for work, the six chapters in this section explore what inclusive design could mean for women at the bottom of the value chain. Digital media scholar Pallavi Bansal draws on interviews with drivers and company representatives from a ride-hailing service to posit a feminist approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI) design on these platforms that would apply Shaowen Bardzell's (2010) framework. Technology professional Shrinath V. muses in his piece on the challenges posed by digital interfaces to first-time users, arguing that developers need to be more cognizant of such experiences as they build products. User-experience expert Laura Herman from Adobe explores the many meanings that craft economies have for makers and buyers, and the ways in which the digital circulation of artisanal products forces an assignment of ownership. But platforms, when designed appropriately, can also serve to bridge the gender divide and promote more equitable growth, as described by Aishwarya Raman and Chhavi Banswal of the Ola Mobility Institute (OMI). This is further emphasized by Achyutha Sharma at Meesho who observes a shift from digital access to digital confidence among women entrepreneurs who join an online marketing platform, negotiating the strict societal norms that discourage their direct participation in the market. On a different note, feminist scholar Sai Amulya Komarraju documents how women gig workers—beauticians who offer their services through an online platform—experience both liberation and oppression as they navigate the app interface and develop creative workarounds.

These essays urge us to think more expansively about what we design, who we design for, and how the various objects and environments we seek to build collide with multiple aspects of people's lives.

Governance

How work is facilitated by states, organizations, and institutional processes also defines and positions the worker, for better or worse. Systems of identity creation and logics of compensation may be one aspect of this, but so are the mechanisms and methods of information flow between the many points in a value chain. The six chapters in this section cover sectors ranging from construction to garments to artisanal crafts, and consider multiple scales of policymaking, programme planning, and implementation. Media scholar Upasana Bhattacharjee's essay opens the section, interrogating the dominant discourse around the artist-entrepreneur which, she notes, shifts attention to craft as a matter of heritage revival rather than livelihood. Radhika Radhakrishnan, Ana María Rodríguez Pulgarín, and Teddy Woodhouse draw on an examination of digital inequality to propose a policy framework for meaningful connectivity that could close the digital gender gap. Taking on a government-led project of resettlement for daily wage workers in a southern Indian city, communication professional Sunitha Don Bosco and housing and development expert Maartje van Eerd force us to recognize the systematic exclusion of the urban poor from techno-utopian policies and plans. Sociologist René König and Management student Paula Wittenburg take on the challenging dimension of ethical governance within the corporate sector. As consultants Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi and Aditi Surie write, it is hard to ignore the impact of technology on a highly gendered sector, education, and their chapter looks at how EdTech has opened up new opportunities for teachers while also turning them into gig workers, with all the precarities that this implies. In the last essay in this section, migration scholar Shweta Mahendra Chandrashekhar zooms out on the knotty problem of migrant worker rights in the construction sector.

Networks

Manuel Castells argued, many years ago, that the primary mode of social organization in the twenty-first century would be networks (Castells 1996). This would, he noted, create the conditions for power to disperse through the

network but also concentrate at the nodes. Our experience in the FemLab project reveals that the characteristics of networks vary according to the size and nature of their formation. To discern how networks form and who populates, controls, or grows them, is a creative exercise that requires that one listens deeply to those who speak and those who remain silent. The first chapter in this section, by feminist technology studies scholar Chinar Mehta, asks how we might think about stakeholder analysis in these amorphous spaces of women's work, where the invisible is often what shapes participation in the network. This is followed by a provocative account by critical legal scholar Siddharth Peter de Souza and visual communication designer Siddhi Gupta, of the role of storytelling as a strategy to document concepts and ideas, visibilize marginal voices, and create solidarity around causes and issues. Media management student Brinda Gupta explores how women in the gig economy were hit by the breakdown of social security during the COVID-19 pandemic, asking whether new forms of consumerism could fill such gaps in the future. Bringing in a global perspective and years of experience with the World Bank, emerging technology markets scholar Jamil Wyne positions the future of work within climate change realities, while communication for social change scholar Anila Backer evocatively describes how a women's collective in Kerala effectively mobilized resistance to oppressive working conditions using a combination of online and offline methods. The last essay in this section, by Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Julia Camargo, Payal Arora, Amanda Alencar, John Warnes, and Erika Pérez, documents digital leisure practices and aspirational labour among displaced communities in Latin America.

Vision

The five essays in the final section of the book firmly position themselves within a feminist framework, pushing the boundaries of what equitable, just, dignified, and pleasurable worklife might look like for those in marginalized locations. The section opens with a chapter by strategy and change consultant Kate Boydell and livelihoods activist Sharmi Surianarain of Harambee Youth Accelerator, in which they emphasize the need to invest in care work while moving away from the narrative of scarcity and fear that has characterized the future of work discourse. Following this, feminist media studies scholar Usha Raman problematizes the blurred boundaries of work and life for those whose livelihoods are carried out from within domestic spaces. In her chapter, digital media anthropologist Payal Arora exhorts us to move away from linking work to honour, instead imbuing all

labour with dignity. In the chapter that follows, investor and change maker Ramona Liberoff asserts that the future of finance is feminist, outlining how this would revolutionize the innovation space and market dynamics. The final essay in the section, by entrepreneur and inclusion advocate Soumita Basu, lays out an approach to thinking about inclusive environments for work and life, that will go beyond mere accommodation.

An Approach to Thinking about Work and Workers

In the span of twenty-three chapters, this book offers multiple windows into the future of work—that is informed by feminist values, whether it be along the axis of design, governance, network/community, or the overarching vision. The contributors, coming as they do, from diverse locations and perspectives. The volume makes no apology for the seemingly disparate accounts of work—in fact, it is this diversity, we believe, that should inform and undergird the future of work for women and indeed, for all those at the bottom of the value chain. Current approaches in intersectional feminism, science and technology studies, and digital cultures all recognize the value of drawing on lived experiences and the politics of marginalization to build new knowledges as we move into increasingly interconnected modes of working and, indeed, living. We offer this as a dialogue across spaces of thinking, planning, and doing, a dialogue that can perhaps lead to a more grounded, inclusive approach to women’s labour in a world and an economy that is increasingly governed by—even mediated by—the digital. In this approach, women’s worlds are central to our understanding of what constitutes work and working, necessitating a social and cultural rather than an economic conceptualization, without of course denying the latter. This is what we would like to call FemWork, an idea elaborated on in the concluding essay in this volume.

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Design



1. AI Design of Ride-hailing Platforms: A Feminist Analysis of Workers' Precarity

Pallavi Bansal

Abstract

The rise of the ride-hailing sector with low barriers to entry and promise of inclusivity are opening new avenues for workers to participate in the platform economy. However, the “digital labour” is managed and controlled by efficiency-oriented AI-enabled algorithms, which often neglects the needs of disadvantaged groups, especially women, amplifies labour precarity, and increases mental stress due to the incentive-based gamification model. This chapter critically analyses the algorithm design of the ride-hailing platforms by conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with the platform representatives, platform drivers, and an AI specialist, and documents analysis of official reports on this sector. In applying Bardzell’s feminist design framework committed to issues such as agency, fulfilment, identity, equity, empowerment, and social justice, this chapter provides guidance on shaping ride-hailing platforms for a more inclusive design.

Keywords: ride-hailing platforms, platform design, algorithms, women cab drivers, artificial intelligence, platform drivers

Introduction

I remember getting stranded in the middle of the road a few years ago when an Ola cab driver remarked that my trip had stopped abruptly, and he could not take me to my destination. Frantic, I still requested him to drop me home, but he refused, saying he could not complete the ride since the app

had stopped working. On another unfortunate day, I was unable to find a cab back home as the drivers kept refusing to take up what they saw as a long ride. When I eventually found a cab, the driver continuously complained about how multiple short rides benefit him more. I tried to tip him after he finished the ride, but instead he requested me to book the same cab again, for a few kilometres, as that would reap more rewards. While I wanted to oblige, I couldn't find the same driver, even though he had parked his car right outside my house. Another time, I spent the night at the airport as I was terrified to book a cab at that late hour. I regretted not checking the flight timings before confirming the booking, having overlooked the fact that women need to be cautious about these things.

Although my first response was to blame the cab drivers for what I saw as an unprofessional attitude, it slowly dawned on me that they have their own constraints. In the first scenario, the app had stopped working, so he couldn't complete the ride for fear of getting penalized, which also resulted in a bad rating by me. In the second situation, I wondered why the algorithms reward shorter rides rather than longer ones. Moreover, how do they assign drivers if proximity isn't the only factor and why was my driver not aware of that? In the third instance, why couldn't I be assigned a woman driver to make me feel safer when travelling late at night?

The rapid rise of the ride-hailing sector with increased digital connectivity, coupled with low barriers to entry, flexibility of timings, and the promise of inclusivity are opening new avenues for workers to participate in the Indian platform economy. However, in this digital matchmaking economy, algorithms are increasingly taking the role of human resource managers, middle managers, and customer service representatives (Schmidt 2017). The automation of this sector may reproduce and perhaps amplify the exploitative and gendered discriminatory practices that have long pervaded these contexts as evident in the growing literature on algorithmic unfairness and oppression (Lee et al. 2015; Page et al. 2017; Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Few workers gain insight into the "logic" of governing work and often must alter their behaviour, even if detrimental to their well-being. A few studies also point towards the reinforcement of the existing intersecting inequalities, exploitation of workers, and unequal power relations, especially based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, and migrant status with respect to the on-demand platforms in the United States (US), India, Mexico, Kenya, and South Africa (Hunt and Machingura 2016; Ticona and Mateescu 2018; van Doorn 2017). Being "worker blind" and designing only "customer-centric" platforms can reduce the gains made by these new technological opportunities for workers, especially women.

This chapter critically analyses the algorithm design of the ride-hailing platforms by drawing on data from nine semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with four platform representatives, four platform drivers, and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) specialist, conducted between July 2021 and January 2022. The platform representatives are the senior managers and executives working at popular ride-hailing platforms in India; the platform drivers (two men and two women)⁴ are working or have worked with mainstream platforms such as Ola and Uber; and the AI specialist (Uday Keith) is a Senior AI Developer with Wipro Digital, representing a neutral standpoint that is not influenced by the ride-hailing segment. It is further supported by carrying out an analysis of about forty documents—official reports from ride-hailing platforms, media coverage, and empirical studies in this area.

By deploying Bardzell's (2010) "Feminist Human-Computer Interaction Design" approach, it centres the lived experiences of those who encounter precarity, informality, and discrimination, and simultaneously discusses the implications for the under-represented women drivers in this sector. It is built on the feminist standpoint theory that advocates for a new domain of user research focusing on enhancing the knowledge and experiences of the "marginal" user. According to Bardzell (2010, 1301), "feminism is a natural ally to interaction design, due to its central commitments to issues such as agency, fulfilment, identity, equity, empowerment, and social justice" and it has far more to offer than just pointing out instances of sexism.

This six-point feminist design framework analyses the ride-hailing sector by using a bottom-up approach and addresses some of the questions raised in the beginning.

Acceptance Rate, Incentives, and Gamification: Quality of Participation

Digital platforms are built on the premise of enabling "flexibility" and "freedom" (Woodcock and Graham 2020), however it is rarely carried out in practice. Uber stated that declining a ride does not affect a driver's promotions⁵ and Ola specified that the driver has the sole discretion to reject a ride,⁶ but as per the cab drivers, they cannot decline or cancel any ride as

4 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

5 <https://help.uber.com/driving-and-delivering/article/what-are-acceptance-rates?nodeId=5cccf675-778e-4495-94e7-27c619d20990>

6 <https://www.olacabs.com/tnc?doc=india-tnc-website>

it can lower their assignment acceptance rate.⁷ A twenty-six-year-old cab driver with Ola and Uber, Hari Singh, referred to this as “rating” and said, “Yes, when you cancel a booking, rating goes down on its own.” Rashid Khan, another cab driver, elaborates, “At one point if you keep on cancelling many rides, then they also suspend your account. First, they lower the rating, then they will give you a warning.”

Secondly, the platforms “transform wage labour into a game, in an often manipulative, behaviouristic manner” (Schmidt 2017, 12), for instance, by incentivizing the drivers on completing a certain number of rides and compelling them to work for longer hours. Scheiber (2017) describes this phenomenon in context to Uber as:

To keep drivers on the road, the company has exploited some people’s tendency to set earnings goals—alerting them that they are ever so close to hitting a precious target when they try to log off. It has even concocted an algorithm similar to a Netflix feature that automatically loads the next program, which many experts believe encourages binge-watching (para 8).

Driver Hari Singh said, if he completes twenty rides in twenty-four hours, he gets INR 150 (\$2) as an incentive, and though it is not mandatory, he takes up multiple rides for sustaining himself financially and repaying the car loan. The current incentive-based model brings forth two major concerns in this sector: extremely low-incentives that reinforce precarity of the blue-collar work; and staying on the road for longer hours, which causes physical fatigue and complicates the situation for women drivers as they have an additional burden of care responsibilities.

Elaborating on a *participatory* approach that is compatible with empathic user research, Bardzell suggests ongoing dialogue between designers and users to explore understanding of work practices that could inform design. This also means if the platform companies and AI developers are oblivious to the needs and concerns of labour, they may end up designing technology that could unintentionally sabotage users. In this case, Uday Keith, a Senior AI Developer with Wipro Digital, suggests the following:

To simplify the process and ensure equity in the gig economy, platform companies can advise AI developers to introduce a “rule.” This would mean fixing the number of minimum rides or tasks a platform worker

7 Acceptance rate is the number of ride requests accepted by the driver divided by the total number of requests received.

gets in a day, which can also help in ensuring a minimum wage to them and provide a certain level of income security. Further, the reward system can undergo a major overhaul. For instance, rather than incentivizing them to drive more and indulge in compulsive game-playing, platform companies can build algorithms that provide financial rewards when the drivers follow traffic rules and regulations, drive within permissible speed limits, and ensure a safe riding experience (Personal interview).

Rating Dynamics: Quality of Embodiment

In the ride-hailing sector, passengers act as “middle managers” and the ratings given by them directly impact drivers’ employment eligibility (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Consequently, all the drivers emphasized the importance of customer ratings as the most significant performance metric but expressed discontentment in terms of how the ratings were computed. Rashid Khan, a male cab driver aged twenty-seven, said:

The customer could get angry at anything and leave a low rating. [...] Most of the time we don’t find out. [...] If the customer leaves us a one star, only then we will find out. [...] I will get a notification from Uber about what happened during this ride that the customer has given you one star. [...] Otherwise if someone leaves a two or a three, then it doesn’t really matter (Personal interview).

Hari Singh further explained that though the platforms listen and acknowledge the drivers’ side of the story, their rating still goes down as they receive comparatively fewer rides after that. Malini Tyagi, aged thirty-five, a former female cab driver with Ola, described how the passengers sometimes did not allow her to stop the car to use the toilet. In this case, she was often forced to end the trip, which “apparently” led to low ratings by the customers. However, she could not identify those low ratings and reach out to the platform executives as the drivers do not get to view the individual ratings and reviews given by the passengers. She said:

The rating is something that you could never control. Because the rating displayed to the driver [...] would always be on a weighted average system. So, we never really got to know which passenger has given us what amount of you know stars or what kind of review. That was something that we never got to know individually (Personal interview).

The above scenarios indicate two things: Firstly, the need for a transparent rating process, and the ability to challenge it. Secondly, the assessment of whether the “rating system” by itself is an ideal representation or embodiment of workers’ performance. The differential understanding in terms of the rating systems is also evident in the empirical study conducted by Raval and Dourish (2016) where they highlight the entanglement of the ratings as drivers have no control on the traffic or the customer’s mood.

Bardzell’s quality of embodiment focuses attention on the bodies, emotions, gender identities, motivating drives, and primordial urges of users. Thus, it is essential to examine if the rating systems are designed in a way that takes into account both drivers’ and passengers’ emotional state or distress, for instance. Further, she suggests acknowledging the humanness of individuals to create products that do not discriminate based on gender, religion, race, age, physical ability, or other human features. This concept should also be applied in relation to how users rate workers and whether they discriminate on the basis of appearances or other factors (Fisman and Luca 2016). Uday Keith recommends:

The platform companies have started using qualitative labels that could help users to rate the workers better. However, we do need to see whether sufficient options are listed and suggest changes accordingly. Moreover, if we want to completely avoid the numerical rating system, we can ask the users to always describe their feedback by writing a sentence or two. This can be analysed using Natural Language Processing (NLP), a subfield of Artificial Intelligence that helps in understanding human language and derive meaning (Personal interview).

Ride Allocation: Quality of Self-Disclosure

A lack of understanding of how algorithms assign tasks or allocate rides makes it difficult to hold these systems accountable. Consequently, a group of United Kingdom (UK) Uber drivers in July 2020 launched a legal bid to uncover how the app’s algorithms work—how the rides are allocated, “who gets the nice rides; who gets the short rides” (Booth 2020, para 8). A similar concern was noticed amongst the Indian drivers with one of the interview participants, Rashid Khan, questioning, “I really wish to know about it [Uber algorithmic system], but madam, who will tell us?” In this respect, Deepak Sharma, a senior executive of a popular ride-hailing app, said:

Apart from proximity, the algorithms keep in mind various parameters for assigning rides, such as past performance of the drivers, their loyalty towards the platform, feedback from the customers, if the drivers made enough money during the day etc. The weightage of these parameters keep changing and hence cannot be revealed (Personal interview).

Uday Keith explained this as follows:

Well, deep learning algorithms used by various companies have a “black box” property attached to them to a certain extent. These algorithms are dynamic in nature as they keep learning from new data during use. One can only make sense of this by continuously recording the weightage assigned to the pre-decided variables (Personal interview).

The fact is that multiple, conflicting algorithms impact the drivers' trust in algorithms as elaborated in an ongoing study of “human-algorithm” relationships (Page et al. 2017). The research scholars discovered that Uber's algorithms often conflict with each other while assigning tasks, for instance, drivers were expected to cover the airport area but at the same time, they received requests from a twenty-mile radius. “The algorithm that emphasizes the driver's role to cover the airport was at odds with the algorithm that emphasizes the driver's duty to help all customers, resulting in a tug o' war shuffling drivers back and forth” (Ibid., 7). Similarly, conflict is often created when drivers are in the surge area and they get pings to serve customers somewhere out of the way.

Moreover, complete information about the rides become all the more relevant for women drivers, who fear unfamiliar locations and routes as expressed by female drivers during my PhD fieldwork. Hari Singh further revealed that Uber shows the nearby drop location to drivers before accepting the ride, only if they have completed a minimum of five rides. All the drivers also said that they could see the passengers' photographs at any given point and even the names were revealed only after accepting the ride. However, passengers can view the drivers' photographs and names immediately after the ride is allotted to them, making transparency a one-sided process in the platform economy.

The quality of self-disclosure recommended by Bardzell calls for users' awareness of how they are being computed by the system. The design should make visible the ways in which it affects people as subjects. For instance, apart from revealing relevant information about the ride that would facilitate drivers' agency to accept or reject a ride, the platform companies can display

the variables and the corresponding algorithmic weightage per task assigned on the smartphone screen of the workers. So, if a platform driver has not been allocated a certain ride due to his past behaviour, then the technology should be transparent to reveal that information to him. This would also help them in understanding which “algorithm” to follow when several of them are at play.

Constant Tracking, Surveillance, and Algorithmic Control: Quality of Ecology

Rakesh Arora, a senior manager of a well-known ride-hailing platform, explained their tracking practices:

The location of driver-partners is tracked every two-three seconds and if they deviate from their assigned destination, our system detects it immediately. Besides ensuring safety, this is done so that the drivers do not spoof their locations. It has been noticed that some drivers use counterfeit location technology to give fake information about their location—they could be sitting at their homes and their location would be miles away. If the system identifies anomalies in their geo-ping, we block the payment of the drivers (Personal interview).

While this appears to be a legitimate strategy to address fraud, there is no clarity on how a driver can generate evidence when there is an actual global positioning system (GPS) malfunction. Another interviewee, a person in a top management position of a ride-hailing company, said, “It is difficult to establish trust between platform companies and driver-partners, especially when we hear about drivers coming up with new strategies to outwit the system every second day.” For instance, extensive media coverage has revealed how some of the drivers had a technical hacker on board to ensure that bookings could be made via a computer rather than a smartphone (Kashyaap 2016) or artificially surged the price by collaborating with other drivers and turning their apps off and on again simultaneously (Hamilton 2019).

Though the “frauds” committed by the drivers are out in the public domain, it is seldom discussed how constant surveillance reduces productivity and amplifies frustration, resulting in “clever ways” to fight it (Möhlmann and Henfridsson 2019). Drivers are continuously tracked by ride-sharing apps, and if they fail to follow any of the instructions provided

by these apps, they either get penalized or banned from the platform. Algorithms control several aspects of the job for the drivers—from allocating rides to tracking workers' behaviour and evaluating their performance. This lack of personal contact with the supervisors and other colleagues can be dehumanizing and disempowering and can result in the weakening of worker solidarities. The technology-mediated attention can intensify drivers' negativity and can have adverse effects on their mental health and psychological well-being. An online ethnographic study of drivers found, “algorithmic interpellations and personalized management techniques lead the drivers to experience anxiety” (Pignot 2021, 218).

The quality of ecology suggested by Bardzell urges designers to consider the broadest contexts of design artefacts while having an awareness of the widest range of stakeholders. It requires us to attend to the ways design artefacts reflexively design us. If we consider the algorithms as design artefacts of the platforms, then there is a need to consider the impact of algorithmic communication on humans. The platform companies can think of adding a human element and focus on building trust that would make workers feel less like machines (Möhlmann and Henfridsson 2019). For instance, women drivers working for hybrid taxi models spoke fondly of their human supervisors during my PhD fieldwork:

They have that patience, that care, they care also. [...] If it is an emergency, I can't help it out, they arrange it very fast. Aarti does all this Superman work. Vandana madam is also very understanding. That is the thing, she understands us (Kala, 47, female driver with Taxshe, Bengaluru. Personal interview).

Data Privacy and Sharing: Quality of Advocacy

There is a dichotomy between how data is used by platform companies and how it is shared or made available to the platform drivers. For instance, Uber Privacy Notice (2021)⁸ states that it collects the location data of the driver and delivery person “when the Uber app is running in the foreground (app open and on-screen) or background (app open but not on-screen) of their mobile device.” Drivers always have an option to go to the settings of a smartphone and disable the location services, but this needs to be enabled every time they want to go on duty. This basically means the platform has access to

8 <https://www.uber.com/legal/it/document/?name=privacy-notice&country=india&lang=en>

drivers' location almost all the time, even when they are off duty. In fact, besides the location data, Uber also has access to the payment transaction information, usage, and preference information, device information, call and text data, log information such as IP addresses, and allows audio or video recordings of the trips in certain countries (currently not operational in India).

However, one of the drivers revealed how the platforms allegedly erase the drivers' data whenever they land in trouble, making this profession potentially "dangerous" for drivers, especially women:

It is dangerous because many incidents have taken place where customers snatch the car. Murders have also happened. And the company does not even take any action against them. [...] And when you go there to complain then they erase their data—"this man was not even driving with us." They erase the data. [...] And such incidents haven't happened just once or twice. So it is even more dangerous for female drivers (Rashid Khan, Personal interview).

In this case, drivers can request a copy of their personal data from ride-hailing platforms, however, they are generally not aware of this. These scenarios indicate power and information asymmetry (Woodcock and Graham 2020) even over user (driver) data that perpetuates harmful and regressive labour practices in the digital platform economy. Bardzell's quality of advocacy involves reflecting on how the technologies that one creates can bring about political emancipation and not perpetuate the status quo, leading to detrimental and asymmetrical structures. For example, collecting user data including location, forms the premise of location-based platforms, but platforms should be designed in a way that users have the freedom to not use a particular technology (Taylor 2017) or to turn off some of the features they do not want to share with the companies, and which are not directly relevant to the platforms. Moreover, the asymmetry can be rectified if the workers have easier access to their data and are allowed to share any monetary benefit arising directly or indirectly out of the data collection (Ibid.).

Bathroom Breaks and Safety Features: Quality of Pluralism

When asked if the algorithms can adjust the route for the drivers, especially for women, if they need to use the restroom, Deepak Sharma, a senior platform executive said:

They always have the option not to accept the ride if there is a need to use the washroom. The customers cannot wait if the driver stops the car for a restroom break and at the same time, who will pay for the waiting time? (Personal interview).

To this, female driver Malini Tyagi responded that men do not need bathrooms in India (as they are known to urinate in public). However, women lose the business/ride if they try to log off from duty and then look around for toilets, especially safe and clean ones. She explained further that even passengers, including women, are not willing to wait if a driver wants to use the restroom.

Further, cab drivers described how “lack of safety” and “failure to act” make it problematic for them to sustain in the ride-hailing sector. All of them shared that they received robotic responses from the customer support executives when they reported unfortunate incidents or misbehaviour of passengers. Maya Sharma, aged thirty-two, female driver with over nine years of driving experience, said:

I had a customer fully drunk and started to misbehave. [...] No action was taken except their promise to talk to the customer about it. [...] “We will look into the matter and discuss internally.” Whenever we spoke to the customer care, they said we are registering a complaint and we will forward it to the right person (Personal interview).

She eventually joined a women-led taxi company after her failure to make the mainstream ride-hailing platforms improve their safety features and act immediately in case of emergencies.

Both the platform representatives Pramod Kumar and Jagdish Chauhan, indicated that the platform companies do not think exclusively for women drivers due to their extremely low representation in this sector. Pramod Kumar said:

There is no separate policy for female drivers. We haven’t given it a thought as we are just platform providers and help in lead generation. [...] Women drivers look good on our PR [Public Relation] campaigns, we take pride in communicating to the public that we provide employment to women (Personal interview).

However, this continued ignorance is alienating women drivers. Maya remarked, “When you have thousands of men drivers working for you

and out of them twenty to twenty-five female drivers are there. Can't you do anything for those female drivers? You must do something for their safety."

Bardzell recommends integrating the quality of pluralism in the design that can take into account the marginal user. Here, an inclusive design would mean considering the viewpoint of marginalized women drivers and making provisions for bathroom breaks or adjusting the algorithms accordingly. Further, besides enabling quick responses, the action taken by the platforms should also be communicated to the drivers, as this was seen as a major cause of dissatisfaction amongst women drivers. In Bardzell's words, "Pluralist designs are likely to be more human-centred than universalizing designs simply because 'human' is too rich, too diverse, and too complex a category to bear a universal solution" (Bardzell 2010, 1306).

Conclusion

The feminist lens in this chapter has helped to identify the entrenched discrimination, exploitation, and information and power asymmetry in the platform economy. It has centred the marginalized workers, especially women, for designing an inclusive framework that would not amplify precarity; rather, commit to equity, diversity, identity, empowerment, and social justice to improve lives. Platforms need to ensure that their algorithms are designed to enable workers and not just be optimized for creating network effects and customer satisfaction. However, it is also worth specifying that deep machine learning tech is constantly dynamic, and this poses a challenge on transparency in algorithmic decision-making. But a solution needs to be found that simplifies this process and enables easier interpretation by the workers. Similarly, it is a difficult trade-off between different values and ethics—e.g., visibility of name/photo can foster discriminatory practices but also allow for increased safety for both customers and labourers. In fact, some of the issues in the platform economy cannot be fixed via only algorithmic design. For instance, ensuring clean and safely located public toilets demands a stakeholder effort with concerted investments by the ride-hailing platforms in partnership with the government. Ultimately, a feminist design, which centres workers' pressures, stresses, and concerns, is required in the platform economy. Programmers could create a more empowering pathway for women workers, who are at an intersection of exploitation and oppression. Platforms need to see the extension of

workers' satisfaction as that of customer gratification, given these two realms reinforce one another. This would also change the attitudes of the passengers, who need to see platform drivers as human drivers, facing challenges at work, like everyone else.

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2. Making Opportunities Inclusive for First-time Digital Users

Shrinath V.

Abstract

Worldwide smartphone subscriptions are estimated at around six billion today, but are forecast to grow by over a billion users over the next four years. The biggest drivers for growth will be first-time digital users from the Global South. Building for this segment requires us to rethink fundamentals of usage, interfaces, and policies to align with their context. Done right, firms can help unlock opportunities for them, and new revenue streams for themselves.

Keywords: inclusive design, next billion users

I live in Bengaluru, often called India's Silicon Valley. Bengaluru has a huge population working in the technology domain. It serves as a testbed for most technology innovations as the level of technology adoption is high. The level of digital awareness is much higher than other places in India. That's why I was surprised when one Monday a couple of years ago, our house help, Bhavani, knocked at our door at 6 a.m., an hour earlier than her usual time. We were surprised to see that she had brought her twenty-two-year-old daughter, Seeta, with her. Seeta was an outlier in their family. She was college-educated, unlike Bhavani's other two daughters. She had recently got a job at a nearby fashion store as a salesgirl. Bhavani had always been proud that Seeta was working in an establishment that had air conditioning, which she saw as a marker of an important firm. Her other daughters had dropped out of school early on and were also engaged in paid domestic work. But Seeta had been able to break free by virtue of finishing her education.

That morning, Bhavani's attitude was different. She was barely able to hold back her tears. The previous night, Seeta had arrived home from work,

distraught and weeping. Bhavani could not understand what she was upset about. They spent the night tense—the daughter wailing that her future was ruined and the mom trying to placate her without understanding what the fuss was about. After a while, she thought my wife would be able to understand their situation, and they came in as soon as day broke.

My wife asked them to sit down and made them a cup of coffee each. Seeta calmed down a bit and spoke about what happened at the store the previous day. The store owner was unhappy with her using her mobile during work hours. He had threatened her that he would put up photos of her slacking on Facebook. This had terrified her, as she thought her reputation amongst her friends and her local community was at stake. She felt her family would lose face—everyone was envious of them and she had managed to get a good job. If they felt her reputation was sullied, she would not be able to find a groom. Over the night, they had envisioned a worst-case scenario over the trivial affair.

After she narrated the incident, we checked whether the sales manager was a Facebook friend. He was not. She later confessed that she had deleted her Facebook account a while ago. Why was she so agitated then? She assumed that any photos of hers posted by anyone else would be seen by all her friends. Facebook's privacy settings had been too complex for her to understand, so she assumed the worst.

We had to reassure her that once she deleted her Facebook account, no one could tag her or make any content public. Even if she had not deleted her account, she could remove tags from photos others posted *before* any of her friends could see them. It took her a while to get convinced about this, but she left a lot calmer than she came.

This incident got me thinking.

Here was a college-educated salesgirl in an urban fashion store. We would assume that she would be comfortable with social media usage. And yet, she was so confused by the controls on the site that she thought there was a threat to her reputation. Finer aspects like abuse of power and violation of privacy were tough for her to comprehend. A threat about posting photos on Facebook from someone who was not even her friend turned her into a nervous wreck.

The story illustrates how we often overlook vast segments of users by assuming they are “just like us.” Using smartphones and apps is like second nature to us. Boardrooms resonate with terms like customer-centricity and human-centred design. Throughout the COVID-19 lockdown, we have seen even young kids adapt to online interfaces and apps. It's easy to assume that if we just hand over a smartphone to someone who's never used it earlier,

they would be able to start using it within a few hours. This is true for many users, especially those in our immediate circles. But we often do not realize that a vast majority of new internet users today are not like us. These are first-time digital users. They have no background to using a computer; the mobile is their first computing and internet device. Many aspects that seem trivial to us can seem confounding to them as they have no earlier reference for using a digital interface.

A decade ago, I led product management for Nokia's location services for the Next Billion Users segment. Back then, smartphone penetration was low, and many users were first trying out services on feature phones that were data-enabled. While traditional location services for smartphones revolved around maps and navigation, we realized that we needed to think ground-up for this segment, most of whom didn't own a vehicle of their own.

Detailed consumer research across different markets showed that there was a huge willingness to try services, provided we understood the constraints of users. Based on consumer insights, we designed a set of data-light services where we built apps that served immediate needs for users like local search, sharing their location with family, and local language interfaces.

Smartphone penetration has improved since then, but I see that many of the challenges of this segment are still difficult to comprehend for those designing technology solutions. I believe that tech firms need to treat the New Internet Users differently. Rather than rush to make decisions, they need to pause, understand context, and then design for them. We need more conversations to make this happen.

Making Digital Technologies More Inclusive

Smartphones have fuelled the imagination of many who have just started understanding the power of the internet. In many ways, this has been timely. We are already seeing that the world post-COVID-19 will rely a lot more on digital technologies. As we shift to transacting more online, we will see a larger number of gig jobs. From entertainment to education, smartphones, apps, and online services will play a greater role in the lives of the new digital initiates.

A lot of this, no doubt, will improve the lives of millions. Going online opens new vistas for exploration and provides new opportunities. Thanks to smartphones, new entrepreneurs and business models are plentiful. We see housewives post extra plates of lunch on WhatsApp groups for others in their locality to order. Local teachers take to Telegram to coach

students appearing for exams. Drivers-on-hire get you and your car safely back home after a late night at the bar, so you need not drive when drunk. Women learn skills like tailoring from YouTube and set up small side-hustles to earn extra money. Others come across videos about what kind of feed to give cattle to improve milk quality and yield, and use the knowledge to improve their revenues.

And yet, there are unexpected challenges. Internet-driven models and services are largely designed for people who are comfortable with digital literacy. There are a lot of assumptions baked into how these are designed or delivered. As first-time digital users start using these services, many of these assumptions do not hold. As digital technologies are likely to play a bigger role in the future of work, here are some points to consider.

Rethinking Design Ground-up

I advise start-ups and large organizations on building and marketing products for the Next Billion Users segment. As someone who's worked closely with the tech industry, I know that the gig model may seem exploitative by design. I believe there are multiple reasons for this, not all malicious. People designing these interfaces view these solutions as engineering tasks, and often do not understand the complexity of making design decisions. Very often, there is a strong bias in assuming that the Next Billion Users are just like us—only poorer. Since few designers come from this background, these biases get solidified in the existing design decisions they take. Decisions once made are hard to reverse as technical capability is usually earmarked for building new features, not redoing existing ones unless there is a strong reason. More focus on understanding users early on in the process can go a long way in reducing design inequities.

Just before the pandemic, I was helping a firm that worked with rural women to think through their product and design. We were looking to encourage first-time users from rural areas to explore the internet to set up micro-businesses (typically a tailoring setup or a beauty parlour in a village/small town), improve their health, and improve their financial literacy.

While conducting market research with a set of users, we realized that there were basic elements discouraging usage. Our initial design followed a typical app usage pattern—users would download and open the app, see a couple of screens with information, login, and then start using the app.

We quickly realized that logging in was a big challenge for users. While it seems natural for those of us who have transitioned from using the internet on desktops/laptops, they found it difficult to understand the concept of

login and why it was required. On enquiring further, we realized that when they bought the smartphone, often the seller would set up the phone for them. The apps they used most frequently were YouTube (which didn't require a login once the phone was set up) and WhatsApp, which had a simple SMS-based authentication. Even apps like Facebook had SMS as the means to sign in, eliminating the need for a login mechanism.

This helped us review the design ground-up. We realized that even something as simple as a login screen was a gate that they found intimidating. We redesigned the flow so that users could use a lot of the content without having to sign in. For any specific information, we built a simple SMS-based authentication and a mechanism to automatically read the One-Time-Password (OTP). This immediately helped ease the transition into app usage.

The exercise also made us look carefully at elements like iconography. The origins of digital iconography can be traced back to inspiration from offline elements present in the Western world. The ubiquitous "save" icon is still a representation of the floppy disk. Most e-commerce sites allow us to add to a cart, which is a visual symbol of a shopping cart. These icons worked well as they were relatable. The first set of users of digital technologies were sufficiently clued into global trends to identify many of these icons. However, many of these representations break down when you think of first-time digital users. A vast majority of users in India have never been in a shopping mall, so they do not relate to a shopping cart. While many of the icons can be *learnt* over time, they can be intimidating to first-time users. A few firms have replaced the shopping cart icon with a traditional shopping bag, or *theli*. This is a far more relatable element that helps users transfer what they know in their offline world to the online world.

Some firms have realized that new users need coaching to build digital confidence. Rather than leave first-time users to ask family members or friends to help them, they are building simple assistive workflows where a visual or voice prompt kicks in when users are stuck on a screen for a period of time.

While building for first-time digital users, it's helpful to start with the basics. Assume they know nothing about elements like login and icons, and cannot read text. Start by exploring their context and the elements they find relatable, and incorporate them into the design.

Being Sensitive to their Context

For most of us, smartphones are deeply personal devices. Our concerns around privacy revolve around larger firms using our data for business purposes. However, for many households in the Next Billion Users segment,

smartphones are shared devices. A family may have a single smartphone that is used by all members.

In the project for building services for rural women, our research showed that usage was based on an accepted convention of priority. The man in the house felt most confident using the devices. Children used the mobile to play games, watch videos, and use social media. Women often had the last priority of usage. They usually had access to the device when the family was asleep or busy. Most of these households also had prepaid data plans, where they could utilize a fixed amount of data per day. Since data was scarce, women were extremely conscious of using data-related services. They were worried that if they ran out of data, they or their children would have to ask the man of the household to recharge it, and there would be uncomfortable questions about their usage. This helped us realize we needed to make the services data-light, but more importantly, give confidence to the users that we were not consuming a lot of data for their usage.

Better Terminology

Websites and apps often have different privacy and consent policies. These are difficult enough for digitally literate users to understand and can befuddle first-time digital users. Most are written in legal language that is difficult for users to comprehend. They are made easy to click through so the apps can claim they received approval from users.

As these vary per app or website, it is often easy to lose track of what one has agreed to. A more inclusive design could involve a common set of representations for terms like privacy and consent, preferably with videos explaining what the users are signing up for. For gig workers, this could greatly improve their understanding of what permissions the business asks of them. For example, as a delivery partner, knowing that you are being tracked only when you are on the job and not otherwise, can be reassuring.

Better Explanation of Downside Risk

Many first-time digital users sign up for gigs based on referrals from friends. But often, the downside risks are not well understood.

A while ago, I took a *tuk tuk* (auto rickshaw) to the office. As I chatted with the driver, I realized that he had signed up earlier as a cab driver for one of the many ride-hailing apps. As part of the deal, he had purchased his taxi on a loan arranged by them. After a few months, he wanted to take a vacation and go home. He parked his taxi at their designated garage.

When he returned, he was told that he had to pay a huge per-day parking charge before he could take his vehicle. This shocked him. He was just functionally literate and had pushed the button on parking policies without much thought during the sign-up. However, the terms were buried in text. He didn't recollect this when he chose the parking option, nor was he informed about the charges as he was deemed to have accepted the charges. Now, he was in a fix. He did not know enough to debate the terms with the company. After a few days, he realized his negotiation was going nowhere, and the taxi loan payments were due. He finally opted to forgo the taxi and the money he had paid for the loan as he felt there was no other choice. This made him wary of gig opportunities in the future, and he decided to take up a safer, though less remunerative route.

Though this may not have been intentional on the part of the company, it clearly illustrates the need of considering the basics of what users comprehend and highlighting downside risks, so users are aware of these. This could again be done by using tools like video, in languages that gig workers are comfortable with. The driver I spoke to would have understood things much better if the downside risks were better explained.

Better Avenues for Grievance Redressal

A food delivery partner I spoke to recently complained about a late-night delivery he had to make a couple of days ago. He had picked up the food but was accosted by local bullies on the way to the drop point. He could do nothing but plead with them to let him go. They relented—he could keep his phone, but they grabbed the food before they let him go. When he rang up the food tech firm, he was put through to a call centre. The agent was sympathetic, but as per policy, he was told that he would have to pay for the food stolen from his remuneration. The policy was likely in place to prevent delivery partners from consuming the food ordered by customers, but didn't consider cases like what had happened to him.

Many first-time users of digital platforms also face issues with unfamiliar interfaces. While “people like us,” fluent with reading, skim verbiage on interfaces, they are intimidating for those with limited literacy. If they end up making a mistake while using the app or service, getting help is difficult. As online businesses grow, we will see many such cases of grievances. Companies should consider a range of inadvertent errors seen from the lens of first-time digital consumers, partners, and others, and plan for grievance redressal.

The Benefits of Inclusivity

Even as we consider these, the big question for companies is: Why invest in these efforts? It's tempting to see this as a social good. But there is a strong business rationale as well. Worldwide smartphone subscription is estimated at over six billion¹ today but is forecast to grow by over a billion over the next four years. Most of these users will come from the Global South and will be first-time users. By investing in understanding their context and building products, features, or services tailored to them, firms stand to gain a strong foothold in this growing segment.

As growth in developed markets slows down, the biggest drivers for growth will be first-time digital users from the Global South. As these users come online for the first time and grow in digital confidence, they will end up consuming more services online. If we build our interfaces and policies thoughtfully for this segment, we can help unlock opportunities for them, and new revenue streams for firms. Done smartly, it could be a win-win.

About the Author

Shrinath V. (shrinath.v@gmail.com) is an expert product coach and consultant. In his last corporate role, he was the head of products for location services on Nokia's phones built for the Next Billion Users. He has been a mentor to various start-ups, building for this segment over the last several years.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide/>

3. Globalized Creative Economies: Rethinking Local Craft, Provenance, and Platform Design

Laura Herman

Abstract

In this chapter, I examine algorithmic platforms' misinterpretation of handmade creative wares that are constructed in the Global South. This serves as an example of Western creative platforms' misinterpretation of local cultural norms. As demonstrated by artisans that are selling both mass-produced and handmade objects, for instance, I argue that Western platforms must reconsider their traditional models of the creative economy. As the primary sites that serve to platform creative wares for a global consumer base, I call on these technology-enabled services to carefully consider the types of creativity that they uplift. Without such considerations, Western technology platforms impose their own assumptions about creativity on a global user base, thereby inhibiting local cultures' creative norms.

Keywords: interface design, creator economy, artisans, algorithmic platforms, creativity

Can you recognize your friends' and family members' hand gestures? People have distinctive gestures: maybe your friend clasps her hands when she's nervous, your mom taps her fingers together when she's excited, or your cousin wags two fingers when making an argument. Now, imagine local artisans who handmake their wares. Their hand gestures are implicit in the production of an object. Creative labour is inherently embodied, requiring physical movements to produce a creation. By extension, this creation is unique to its maker's body. Previous research has demonstrated the large

role that embodiment plays in creative processes, whereby the artisan's physicality is imbued within their output (Freedberg and Gallese 2007). In addition to forming a cornerstone of the creative process, embodiment also plays a key role in the downstream perception of such creations. The audience's response to a creative object is influenced by their perception of the creator's embodiment.

Indeed, archaeologists have found Indian potters' personal gestures can help identify the maker of a given pot (Gandon et al. 2018). In this way, a maker's gestures form an identifiable signature that is inherent in the object they've made. Furthermore, certain tribal groups may exhibit long-standing artistic practices that signal the origin of a piece through its materials, the tools by which it was made, stylistic selections, and other meaning-making choices.

In this chapter, I explore the embodied artisanal practices of makers in the Global South, and demonstrate how Western-born technology platforms may exhibit preconceptions that are ill-suited to users in non-Western contexts. It is dangerous for these platforms to assume that their offerings are truly universal, without considering the local cultural norms that may impact the technology's usage.

The Handmade Premium

In the Western economy, a premium is placed on handmade wares: shoppers are consistently willing to pay more for objects that are handcrafted by individuals. Particularly in an era of global outcry surrounding climate change—of which industrial fabrication is a major contributor—consumers are seeking out objects that evoke home-grown craftsmanship. Media scholars have studied consumers' reactions to handmade objects (Fuchs, Schreier and Van Osselaer 2015), finding that objects that are handmade are more “attractive” to consumers. They describe attractiveness as the participants' attitudinal or behavioural disposition towards the object, including their willingness to purchase it. This level of attractiveness and value is illustrated by Dior creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri's recent collaboration with local artisan couple Madhvi and Manu Parekh at the Chanakya School of Craft in Mumbai, India. The company proudly shared in *Harper's Bazaar* that the resulting fabrics “took between 500 and 2,800 hours each to complete.” By highlighting the role of local artisans, the handmade nature of the pieces, and the sheer amount of time invested in each object, Dior seeks to offer a premium product for its elite clientele.

Maria Grazia Chiuri describes the artisan's traditional cultural process as bringing "added value."

Indeed, Fuchs et al. revealed that their study participants' preference for handmade objects persists both in comparison to objects that are explicitly machine-made as well as "control" objects for which no information about production was provided. They claim that consumers perceive the artisans' love (which they define as an emotion of strong or passionate attachment) as being imbued in the handmade object and distributed with the object as it is sold. Importantly, this perceived "distributed love" can be for either the ultimate end-product that is created *or* the process by which the object was created. Other researchers (Newman and Bloom 2012) have shown that consumers' estimates of the value of a creative object increase according to the level of direct physical contact between the creator and the object during the creation process. To this end, showing the *process* by which an object was made (if it is handmade) will further enhance the attractiveness of the object to consumers.

In a recent study, my collaborator Angel Hwang and I examined what factors influenced Western users' perceptions of creativity online (Herman and Hwang 2022). We found that viewers also evaluate the *creativity* of an output according to the perceived process by which it was made. Those items that involved more complex processes—and particularly those that are handmade—were rated as more creative (and therefore, more valuable) than those that were not. The viewers' focus on the making process may be explained by theories of embodied cognition (Chiel and Beer 1997; Gallese and Lakoff 2005; Wilson 2002), in which one's perception is grounded in "mimesis," the embodied mimicry of an action (Gebauer and Wulf 1995; Zlatev 2008). Previous neuroscientific studies have demonstrated that dancers will neurally "mimic" the dance when viewing the performance of other artists (Calvo-Merino et al. 2005). In a similar way, the people who participated in our study were mentally "experiencing" the process of creating the creative piece, developing physical empathy for the artisan's process. If that process involved particular expertise, the viewer would find more value in the creative work.

When interpreting the process and subsequent value of each piece, viewers accorded a premium to those pieces that contained physical representations of handmade processes such as visible brushstrokes (Chamberlain et al. 2018). Such physical manifestations of the handmade process render the creator's process visible through their use of the medium, thereby enabling an enhanced perception of process. Therefore, visual and physical representations of handmade-ness, as well as advertising and brand messaging touting handmade processes, serve to increase creative value. Chiuri's comments in *Harper's Bazaar* are a prime example of such messaging.

Globalizing Creative Value

This proclivity to objects made via handmade processes is part of a broader trend towards local, organic, recycled, handmade, unique, and artisan purchasing behaviour. It is worth noting that much of this trend focuses on Western audiences. The perceived value and/or attractiveness of handmade objects is likely to be different for consumers in “developing” countries. For instance, machine-made objects may be deemed more valuable due to a perception of those objects as more advanced or modern. However, a preference for the handmade is also emerging among elites who are reviving the popularity of their local craft cultures, for instance, the revival of handloom *saris* in India (Sharma 2020).

The situation in India exhibits further nuance, as evidenced by a recent conversation with Harshit Agarwal, a contemporary Indian artist, who described a societal association of traditional handmade wares with certain socially marginalized castes. Indeed, the context in which the item is handmade may play a key role: while scholars such as Fuchs and team (Fuchs, Schreier and Van Osselaer 2015) examined objects handmade in a Western context by local artisans, they did not examine consumers’ reactions to products that may be handmade at a distance from them. For instance, an object that was handmade in the Global South may be deemed less valuable by Western consumers. Along with the location of creation, the conditions of creative labour may also play a role: indeed, Western consumers are less willing to purchase objects made in “sweatshop” conditions, prioritizing the well-being of the objects’ creators. It’s worth noting here that many Western companies (including luxury fashion houses) have long relied on outsourced, uncredited artisans in the Global South to produce their wares. The new development, as illustrated by Chiuri’s claims in *Harper’s Bazaar*, is the industry’s *acknowledgement* of the role that global craftspeople are playing in the creative process. Meeting customers’ demands for transparency and inclusivity, brands are now touting pieces that are “Made in India” just as they previously highlighted pieces that were “Made in Italy.”

However, Western tropes cannot be neatly mapped onto Southern realities. As Payal Arora highlighted in a recent podcast (Shields 2021), Western ideals exhibit a dichotomy between “handmade” objects and mass production: it is viewed as contradictory for an item to be both handmade and mass produced. That is, Western populations expect that only a small quantity of a given handmade object exists. However, Arora pointed out that in Indian contexts, many artisans are both handmaking and mass-producing traditional objects as part of their collective cultural practice in

craft making. In many cases, these mass production sites represent poor working conditions and tireless bodily effort, where locals—women, in particular—toil for hours on end to handmade a large quantity of a given object.

Here, we are beginning to see how biased assumptions may be baked into Western-born technology platforms, exhibiting detrimental downstream effects on local communities in the Global South.

Designing for Creative Justice

Global South artisanal practices present a predicament for digital platforms on which such items might be sold. Western interfaces and economies begin to unravel when confronted with the sale of objects that are both handmade and mass-produced. For instance, a platform like Etsy—purportedly designed for the sale of handmade objects—uses algorithms to deprioritize objects that appear to be mass-produced. This results in an unfair disadvantage for such women artisans in the Global South. Furthermore, the platform maintains minimal accountability due to the “black box” nature of algorithmic decision-making.

Indeed, online platforms have resulted in many such disadvantages for populations in the Global South. As internet platforms are primarily developed by Western companies, Western norms of data governance are implicitly imposed upon an increasingly global user base. Furthermore, the data produced by these users are harvested and exploited in a manner that has been described as “data colonialism” (Couldry and Mejias 2019). This is particularly concerning when this data extraction occurs unbeknownst to the communities providing the data.

In the cultural sector, the assumptions inherent in Western-born platforms may represent a new form of appropriation. For instance, algorithms developed by Western entities are being used to “authenticate” artistic outputs (Mind Matters 2019; Cascone 2017). However, creation processes in the Global South—which are often communal—do not necessarily follow a Western construction of provenance. Similarly, algorithms that are used to determine whether an object is legitimately handmade for the purposes of value creation (e.g., eligibility for Etsy platforming) may subscribe to the Western handmade/mass-produced dichotomy described above, thereby improperly classifying the outputs of traditional Indian models of creative work.

It is a connected platform’s *design* with which a community interacts: as the only tangible and user-facing aspect of users’ online experience, an

interface's affordances shape data, usage, and privacy decisions. Therefore, it is imperative to consider how such interfaces may be designed in ways that are inclusive—rather than dismissive or even exploitative—of local cultural communities. When platforms are designed in an inclusive manner, access to a global audience of consumers may further reverse the colonialist power dynamic by providing local artisans with avenues for development, empowerment, and financial security.

The first step in designing platforms that are inherently inclusive is to conduct research into the diverse range of users that may interact with the platform. This will formulate a foundation of empathy upon which truly inclusive platforms may be designed. By understanding local creative processes, for instance, a platform may be designed that fits into existing cultural practices, rather than demeaning or obfuscating current modes of creative expression.

Nanako Era, Molly Bloom, Francesca Kazerooni, Liza Meckler, Emma Siegel, and Erica Ellis, and I have written a guide to inclusive research (Herman et al. 2021). While it centres the experience of people with disabilities, many of the approaches will resonate with those interested in conducting research that is inclusive of other attributes, including cultural identity. For instance, one must carefully consider the mechanisms by which participants are recruited: rather than cold, individual outreach, building relationships with trusted community groups could be most beneficial for the communal nature of creative collectives in the Global South. (Though, of course, it's worth considering who may be excluded from such collectives.) Similarly, access is a key consideration; in the guide, we offer tips for ensuring that a participant is not excluded from research due to the devices they use or their mechanisms of transportation.

In the case of artisans that are selling both mass-produced and handmade objects, Western platforms must reconsider their traditional models of the creative economy. As the primary sites that serve to platform creative wares for a global consumer base, these technology-enabled services must carefully consider the types of creativity that they uplift. Without such considerations, Western technology platforms impose their own assumptions about creativity on a global user base, thereby inhibiting local cultures' creative norms. In sum, it is imperative for Western technology companies to conduct rigorous research (or, ideally, hire on-the-ground employees) in the bevy of global markets that they seek to infiltrate. Otherwise, Western assumptions and biases will be encoded into their products, resulting in ill-fated local experiences.

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4. Leveraging Platforms to Bridge the Gender Divide and Drive Inclusive Growth: Perspectives and Recommendations from India

Aishwarya Raman & Chhavi Banswal

Abstract

By affording the flexibility to monetize assets when the worker wants, platforms are transforming the twenty-first-century workplace, offering attractive remunerative avenues for women. Even the traditionally male-dominated job of driving is witnessing a heightened participation from women. Based on a mixed methods study involving 700 women within and outside the platform economy, and representatives of over forty organizations, this chapter unpacks the enablers and barriers women experience while participating in the platform economy in India. The chapter focuses on the trade-offs between social production and economic participation, and the access to assets and the opportunity to monetize them, among others. And concludes with the recommendations for the public sector and industry to mainstream women's participation in India by leveraging digital platforms.

Keywords: social production, finance, skill development, social security, flexibility, impact of digitalization

Driving against the Tide: Jayalaxmi, Taxi Driver, Chennai

The journey of her empowerment meandered through different avenues before Jayalaxmi found success in what would generally be viewed as an unconventional profession for women in India. Based in the bustling residential area of Choolaimedu, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, she had enrolled at the Association for Non-traditional Employment for Women (ANEW) to develop her tailoring skills

and provide better services to her customers with a knowledge of computers. Following a paperwork mismatch, she turned instead to a 2.5-month-long driving course and acquired a licence by the end of the programme.

The switch between the two professions was, however, not smooth sailing. Despite her family's reservations, Jayalaxmi worked as a cab driver at an upscale hotel in Chennai for a payment of INR 7,000 (\$93) per month. A year later, through ANEW's placements, she secured herself a stint with Ola Cabs, and in time, was able to buy her own car to work full-time. At Ola, she takes back a whole day's revenue after minimal commission to the platform. She now earns INR 2,500–3,000 (\$33–40) per day, and has also earned a good reputation at Ola as well as in her community.

What started as an unconventional journey peppered with uncertainties, now has Jayalaxmi as well as her family immensely satisfied with her successful career in driving (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 47).

Are Platform Jobs Designed for Women?

Jayalaxmi is just one of the estimated 100,000 women who are today a part of the location-based platform economy in India (Ibid.). These include on-demand passenger mobility, hyperlocal delivery, logistics, and professional home services domains. At two per cent of the total location-based platform workforce in the country (Ibid.), women's participation might seem meagre, but it is a step in the right direction nevertheless. Driving has always been a male-dominated profession, not just in India, but around the world too, with one per cent of New York's yellow taxi drivers and two per cent of England's black cab drivers being women (Levingston 2020). On the contrary, platforms like Uber have reported that the proportion of women driver-partners in mature markets like the United States (US) and Canada is twenty per cent, while globally, it is fourteen per cent.¹ Closer home, Ola reported that the number of women driver-partners increased by forty per cent every month (Bansal 2021). Staffing company TeamLease also reported that the number of women in platform-based jobs in the mobility and logistics sector increased by seventy per cent from 40,000 in 2018 to 67,900 in 2019 (Kar 2019).

Undoubtedly, platforms appear to offer women something that is missing in the traditional employment sectors. Research—both in India and elsewhere—identifies the differentiator to be flexible and the choice to

1 https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/62a2871b-271b-4256-b426-65b2012doof7/00418+IFC+DTE+Report_Complete_Layout+Final2-pxp.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=m9ksr4q

monetize assets at will. Greater work flexibility goes hand-in-hand with higher employment rate among women, especially mothers.² Is flexibility alone sufficient to attract and retain women in the platform economy?

Ola Mobility Institute's (OMI) report, "Women in the Platform Economy: Breaking Barriers & Driving Inclusive Growth," further unpacks this phenomenon. The study adopted a mixed methods approach to understand the enablers and barriers of women's participation in the platform economy. Primary data of eighty-four women platform workers was collected through online surveys and shared by select platforms with their workers. The surveys were shared in English, Hindi, and Kannada to ensure inclusivity of women from all backgrounds. Due to the pandemic, the target of approaching at least two per cent of the female platform workforce for a qualitative study could not be sufficiently met. Further, responses were collected from 624 women not working in the platform economy, across six cities—Bengaluru, Mysuru, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, and Delhi. The sample size and respondents were chosen based on the need to have representation across location base, age group, income levels, marital status, etc.—indicators which formed the focus of the survey. The responses captured in three vernacular languages were controlled for age and household income. Lastly, representatives of over forty organizations ranging from the Government of India to the state governments of Delhi, Karnataka, and Rajasthan, as well as skill development agencies, financiers, think tanks, etc. were interviewed.

The study found that twenty-five per cent of the women workers interviewed chose platform work with a desire to become an entrepreneur or their own boss.

Table 4.1: Primary reasons for choosing platform work

Reason for joining platform	Percentage
Want to be an entrepreneur	25%
I like to apply the skills I've learnt	20%
To keep myself busy	13%
Assured income and the ability to have my own asset	12%
To earn money to pay for college or save for dependents	11%
Less stress	9%
Friends/ relatives are with a platform	4%
More personal time	4%
I lost my job and I'd like to do platform work till I get a full-time job. I like to apply the skills I've learnt in any way possible	2%

2 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_771749.pdf, p. 22.

Among other reasons were to pay for their higher education, to keep themselves busy, or apply the skills they have learnt. Notably, it was found that women are more likely to take up platform jobs after their education and marriage. This is a positive finding that contradicts the macro-economic trend of married Indian women withdrawing from the labour force on account of caregiving responsibilities (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 33; Mehrotra and Sinha 2017, 58).

Another important determinant in women's participation in the platform economy has been their need to support dependents. Of the women platform workers interviewed, ninety per cent reported supporting two or more dependents. Over eighty per cent had dependents younger than eighteen years of age. This perhaps motivated women to also consider platform work as a full-time opportunity: eighty-four per cent of the respondents, with the remainder sixteen per cent being home-makers and students. Platforms form a primary source of income for the majority of the women interviewed (seventy-five per cent), affording high-earning opportunities compared to non-platform jobs³ (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 34).

Table 4.2: Hours spent in platform work (per week)

Hours spent a week	Percentage
Between 26 and 40 hours	22%
Between 5 and 25 hours	38%
Less than 5 hours	12%
More than 40 hours	29%

Table 4.3: Monthly income from platform work

Monthly income from platform work	Percentage
INR 10,000 to 25,000	39%
INR 25,000 to 40,000	34%
INR 40,000 to 75,000	20%
Less than INR 10,000	5%
Over INR 75,000	2%

Overall, there is a stronger preference for platform work over other avenues, notably for the flexibility it offers, especially to married women, aside from

3 https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Indias-Emerging-Gig-Economy_The-Future-of-Work-for-Women_update7.24.20.pdf, p. 32.

higher earning opportunities. Around seventy-three per cent of women interviewed chose platform work over other part-time and full-time opportunities. Women platform workers are also more likely to continue in this workforce given the earning opportunity and flexibility (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 34–35).

Table 4.4: Motivation to continue in the platform economy

Motivation to continue in the platform economy	Percentage
Earning extra money	46%
Working for myself and being my own boss	28%
Working the hours I choose	14%
Choosing my own task	5%
Working in a place that I choose	4%
Doing what I enjoy	3%

This is further corroborated by an analysis of the reasons to join platforms as reported by thirty per cent of the women interviewed outside the platform economy.

Table 4.5: Reasons of non-platform women on willingness to participate in the platform economy

Reasons for willingness	Percentage
Want to be an entrepreneur/ my own boss/ flexibility of hours	20%
I'd like to apply the skills I've learnt in any way possible	16%
Assured income and the ability to have my own assets	14%
I've lost my job and I'd like to do platform work till I get a full-time job	12%
To earn money to pay for college or save for dependents	11%
To keep myself busy	10%
More personal time	8%
Less stress	5%
Friends/ relatives are with a platform	4%

The most significant subset of women willing to join the platform economy (twenty per cent) wanted to be entrepreneurs, their own boss, and have the flexibility to work when they wanted.⁴ This primarily indicates women's aspirations to be in independent leadership positions in the workplace.

4 This data has not been segregated by caste or other identity markers.

Consequently, these women desire to be autonomous workers who can take charge of their daily activities and lifestyle. Platform economy, as already mentioned, allows a worker the flexibility to set their own working hours, aside from what jobs they choose, when, and where. Among other reasons, around ten per cent specified the need to “keep themselves busy” and another eight per cent respondents wanted “more personal time.” These further speak to women’s inclination for autonomy over their schedules, and by extension, of their daily activities and lifestyle. Making their own choices when it comes to determining when to log in/off from the platform for work, rationing time for family work, education, hobbies, etc., can empower women. Additionally, the survey showed that fourteen per cent of respondents wanted to join the platform economy for assured income and the ability to own an asset (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 62). Overall, these were the women who were seeking not only livelihood opportunities but also a chance to improve their quality of life, and in effect, become more independent, mobile, and active contributors to the economy.

However, it is imperative to also understand why seventy per cent of the women interviewed were unwilling to participate in the platform economy. About thirty per cent of the 437 respondents stated lack of permission or support from family or husbands, and presence of family responsibility as the reason for their unwillingness. The extent of unwillingness increased by age and was the highest among married and widowed women. Thirteen per cent of those unwilling to join the platform economy stated that they already had a job: employed (sixty-five per cent) and self-employed (thirty per cent) (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 61).

Additionally, thirty-three per cent indicated that they were not interested in taking up work, which may be due to a variety of reasons, including household responsibilities, remuneration not matching their current or expected salary, or preferences for other job types. Of these, about sixty per cent formed home-makers, all married, which suggests they are not the breadwinners of the family. For these women, home-making was a full-time job and assimilating into the platform economy was not a priority. These sixty per cent home-makers, who were not interested in taking up platform work equally, constituted the age groups 31–35, 36–40, and 41–45 years at twenty-five per cent each. There were only fifteen per cent women in the age group of 26–30 years and two per cent in the age group of 18–25 years in this category, which suggests younger married women are more likely to change jobs or have mutable priorities over older married women (Ibid.).

Other reasons cited were safety (twelve per cent), lack of awareness (eight per cent), no time for platform work (seven per cent), studying (three

per cent), and age (two per cent). Those who stated age as the reason were over forty years old. Perhaps these women believed age to be a barrier and needed to be made aware of opportunities in the platform economy one could tap into (Ibid.).

Beyond socio-cultural constraints, economic factors like access to assets can make or break women's economic participation.

Women, Assets, and the Platform Economy

The concepts of asset ownership, control, and empowerment are intertwined. There is a positive correlation between women's empowerment and their access or exercise of control over economic assets such as land, savings or credit, vehicle, mobile phones, and even skills. Property ownership, for instance, enhances women's bargaining power (Menon et al. 2020, 47). Notably, access to finance is key to female entrepreneurship, which today constitutes a paltry thirteen per cent of small businesses in the country. This could most likely be due to the ubiquitous gender biases in financial accessibility. Unsurprisingly, seventy per cent of the total finance requirement of women entrepreneurs in the country remains unmet (Singh 2021).

While women's share in vehicle ownership and holding driving licences is improving, their representation in jobs with driving as an integral part remains low. In 2018, there were just 200 women auto-rickshaw drivers out of the total of nearly 200,000 drivers in Mumbai suburbs (Daniels 2018). It is not uncommon that even when women own permits for taxis, a male member of the family does the driving and earning (Ibid.). Even as prevailing gender stereotypes lead to low representation of women in these roles, their low ownership of vehicles exacerbates it further.

Beyond the glaring disparities in men and women owning assets, the perception of asset ownership itself varies between them. Women are more likely to share assets than have exclusive control over them. Limited ownership and control inhibit their ability to monetize the idle capacity of these assets. Similarly, impediments can be seen around women's mobile phone usage. Inequitable access to mobile phones inhibits communication and information flow, resulting in poorer access to education, healthcare, employment, and financial services. The digital divide and information asymmetry only augment the lack of awareness around the platform economy. Certainly, the wide gender gap in asset ownership for land, motor vehicles, and mobile phones is indicative of a huge missed opportunity for unlocking women's potential (Raman and Kulkarni 2021, 7).

However, when women do have access to assets, their willingness to participate in the economy, especially the platform economy, improves. This was reflected among the non-platform women interviewed by OMI. The desire to participate in the platform economy was higher among those who owned vehicles (sixty-six per cent) as opposed to those who did not (thirty-four per cent). A closer look at women platform workers revealed interesting insights on asset ownership and labour force participation. Among the individual women platform workers surveyed, around forty-seven per cent of respondents owned vehicles, with eighty-four per cent owning two-wheelers, thirteen per cent four-wheelers, and three per cent three-wheelers. Of these vehicle-owning respondents, fifty per cent women had bought their vehicular asset to work in the platform economy. This suggests that half the respondents saw lucrative value in their platform jobs and have invested in a vehicle to make themselves more mobile (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 43).

Platforms Reframe Women's Role in Public and Private Life

Platforms generate an array of livelihood opportunities by unlocking the commercial value of assets, both tangible (phones, motor vehicles) and intangible (skills, permits, etc.). This is especially beneficial for women, as platforms can afford them flexibility to monetize assets—often shared with family members. Thus, platforms have the potential to delink female labour force participation from the limitations of conventional labour markets by providing participants the agency to choose what and when they monetize—again a feature predominantly absent from traditional employment.

Just as digital platforms attract students and professionals—young and old alike, by affording many advantages,⁵ platforms may just be the ideal workplaces for women—a worker category that is often constrained by many socio-cultural and economic factors. While platformization may not have dismantled power structures that impact women's lives, the visibility it affords them has, however, helped rupture the prevalent socio-cultural mechanisms of control that have conventionally moulded women's mobility and access to work (Anwar, Pal and Hui 2018, 111:1).

For women and men alike, the impact of digitalization of livelihoods, i.e., platformization, is immense. Platforms democratize access to livelihoods.

5 https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Promise_of_Platform_Work.pdf, p. 11.

Contrary to conventional enterprises, platforms do not have gatekeepers in the form of recruiters or hiring managers imposing the number and characteristics of the workforce (Kulkarni and Ramchandran, 2021). Furthermore, studies have indicated a clear trend among individuals from marginalized communities using platform work for economic opportunities that circumvent social discrimination in their work life (Prabhat et al. 2019). A qualitative investigation in 2021 found drivers from the largely traditional taxi and informal labour sectors transitioning to platform-based driving, motivated by flexibility of labour and opportunity to augment incomes, hitherto unavailable in their former employment (Sehrawat et al. 2021). The study also posits that platformization ushers employment and wage stability, despite the lack of employee status (Ibid.). Lastly, the study—employing a human-computer interface (HCI) approach, finds that ride-hailing platforms can be conceptualized as shaping and being shaped by the driver’s agency in their everyday work (Ibid.).

Beyond earning augmentation, platforms strengthen the skills of the workers, too. In late 2019, 3,300 platform workers affiliated to digital mobility platforms, and 1,700 non-platform workers—totalling 5,000 workers—in the mobility economy were interviewed across twelve cities in India. The large-scale study on the mobility economy and case studies from professional home services-based platform economy—published in the report “Unlocking Jobs in the Platform Economy: Propelling India’s Post-Covid Recovery”—found that platforms enhance the skills of their workers (Ramachandran and Raman 2021, 62).

Platforms not only recognize prior skills but also impart skills through in-person and virtual training programmes to their platform partners to hone soft-skills, communication, and financial literacy and proficiency. These skills are transferable to other personal, professional, and social contexts, enabling the horizontal mobility of workers (Ibid.). For instance, a platform worker driving a taxi may double up as a delivery executive for the same or different platform, thus improving their remunerative opportunities. This is a common worker reattribution phenomenon in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic the world over (Raman and Ramachandran 2020, 9, 19).

Transferable skills thus gained through platform labour also allow for vertical mobility, thereby expanding the remunerative opportunities of workers and catering to the aspirations in the market. For instance, platform businesses have launched accelerator programmes, aiming to provide opportunities to those delivery partners who want to move to managerial roles. These “seasoned” delivery partners bring with them a nuanced understanding of the ground-level dynamics, which brings platform businesses immense

value in their day-to-day operations (Sarkar 2022). Here, vertical mobility marks the gradual upskilling of the worker through association with the platform and makes them more skilled at their job, setting off positive effects through the ecosystem. Similarly, fashion sellers associated with certain e-commerce websites receive training through their in-house entrepreneurship programme to turn their passion to a successful business, and are able to move up because of their enhanced skills (Balakrishnan, R. 2019).

It is also noteworthy that platforms induce digital proficiency among platform and non-platform workers alike. An interesting outcome of the app-based revolution in the mobility economy is the impact on the non-platform drivers, who also have access to smartphone technology. In the 5,000-worker study, over half of the drivers outside the platforms reported usage of navigating apps to help their movement in the city. Another forty-two per cent also accepted mobile wallets and other online payments using their smartphones. A bigger proportion, well over two-thirds, used their phones to access social media as well as news sites, apart from other entertainment options like games, movie portals, etc. (Ramachandran and Raman 2021, 61–62). Thus, platform-driving has potentially spurred mobile phone proficiency among non-platform drivers as well (Ibid., 62).

Overall, for women specifically, platforms can reframe their role in public and private life. Women no longer have to make the binary choice between managing the family and pursuing a livelihood opportunity. Women now have the choice to work at will. It is of course essential to situate this choice in the larger context of the disproportionate burden of social production and caregiving responsibilities that women carry. Women spend 9.8 times more time than men on unpaid domestic chores and 4.5 hours a day caring for children, elders, and the sick.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated women's predicament; the share of women's unpaid work grew by nearly thirty per cent in 2020–21 (Ibid.). Against this backdrop and notwithstanding the urgent need to make society more gender-equal and equitable, women have the flexibility and choice to work when and where they want, thanks to the platform economy.

Paving the Way for a Gender-Inclusive Economy

The platform economy holds the key to bring more women into the workforce. This is critical for a country like India where India's female labour

6 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/7/faq-women-and-covid-19-in-india>

force participation rate⁷ was at an all-time low at 20.8 per cent in 2019, almost five percentage points below its figure at the start of the decade.⁸ Since then, it has only shown marginal improvement, touching 22.8 per cent in 2020.⁹ Studies show that increasing women's labour force participation by even ten percentage points could add \$770 billion to India's GDP.¹⁰ With platforms democratizing access to livelihoods, there is an opportunity for emerging economic powerhouses like India to leverage digital platforms and mainstream women's economic participation.

This begins by easing women's access to platform jobs by enhancing access to assets. The foremost asset is finance, access to which empowers a woman to invest in her education, skill development, and purchase of smartphones, vehicles, etc., all of which can be monetized. In 2019–21, the proportion of women in India with bank accounts that they use rose to 78.6 per cent from fifty-three per cent in 2015–16.¹¹ While women's access to financial services is on the rise, they still have limited access to digital banking and institutional credit, the latter caused by the absence of a collateral or the ability to demonstrate creditworthiness, among other systemic barriers (Dasgupta 2021). Some of the ways in which the platform economy is solving these concerns have lessons for India and the rest of the world.

For instance, all women platform workers interviewed in 2020–21, have bank accounts largely used for family transactions (forty-two per cent), platform transactions (twenty-five per cent), accounts opened under government schemes (nineteen per cent), and savings accounts or fixed deposits (fourteen per cent). This is noteworthy since all platform businesses open bank accounts for women (and men) at the time of onboarding them as workers (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 48). An innovative method to bridge the gender gap in digital banking can be integrating “Unified Payments Interface (UPI)-receive-only” accounts for women workers. While the women workers are able to carry out expenditure through non-digital means, this method would also enable them with a regular inflow of income, creating a financial profile, helping them access credit in the future.

7 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

8 <https://www.ilo.org/global/lang-en/index.htm>

9 https://www.mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/301563/Annual_Report_PLFS_2019_20m1627036454797.pdf/18afb74a-3980-ab83-0431-8e84321f75af, p. 46.

10 <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-asia-pacific>, p. 109.

11 <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/more-indian-women-use-bank-accounts-participate-in-decision-making-survey-7764641.html>

Further, platforms today partner with FinTech companies to extend cash flow-based loans, as against collateral or asset-based credit, to their workers. A FinTech company headquartered in Bengaluru has provided cash flow-based loans at scale to women workers across the spectrum ranging from those engaged in platform labour (forty-five per cent), to those in warehousing or facility management (twenty-one per cent), other livelihood opportunities (twenty per cent), home services (twelve per cent), security services (one per cent), and e-commerce (one per cent) (Ibid., 49).

These solutions by FinTech and platform businesses build on the robust foundation laid by the self-help group (SHG) and microfinance movements in India. Three decades ago, India's National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) started the programme of linking SHGs to banks to serve the unbanked and under-banked, and nurture a savings habit among the members of the SHGs. Institutional credit is thus made available to women in their hour of need. Women, even the poorest, are seen to save more, and as their income increases, their savings also rise.¹² Today,

[m]embership of SHGs has enabled economic empowerment of women through control of resources, political empowerment through participation in decision-making, social empowerment through better social standing obtained by better economic status. Thus, the SHGs have become the most powerful conduits for incubating and empowering women to move from subsistence to sustainability (Ibid.).

FinTechs leverage technology to strengthen the existing microfinance solutions in India. Using technology, FinTech companies offer micro-credit to all, for a host of purposes ranging from purchase of monetizable assets to fulfilling a personal need. Like offline micro-credit solutions, FinTechs too offer cash flow-based credit. Public and private sectors alike recognize that FinTech services should leverage client-level transaction data for product development, betterment of services, and improving the overall system (Ibid.). Thus, FinTechs leverage Artificial Intelligence, and new kinds of data being generated by workers' transactions on digital platforms to profile the borrower, extend credit to them, and even nudge them to repay in time, thereby improving both access to credit and the creditworthiness of platform workers. The day is not far when based on the success of group credit and savings models adopted in the analogue world, FinTechs too offer group lending solutions through apps for India's masses.

12 <https://www.nabard.org/auth/writereaddata/tender/SoMFI-2020-21.pdf>, p. 14, 90.

In the wake of the pandemic, many platform businesses have leveraged FinTech solutions to offer credit and insurance at zero-to-nil interest to all their workers (Ibid., 21, 50). The new-age financial institutions and FinTechs can play an important role in bridging the gender gap for financial services. Even as these digital-first solutions are scaled, platforms, governments, and civil society can come together to enhance the digital and financial proficiency of girls and women across the country.

Then comes the access to monetizable assets such as vehicles. Here, vehicle ownership is not the prerequisite as much as the access to said asset. In this context, the emergence of the sharing economy gains significance. Today, there are asset-sharing services allowing an individual to lease a vehicle—two-, three- or four-wheeler on a daily basis—and earn a livelihood. In fact, bike-sharing companies in India are actively partnering with e-commerce companies to fulfil last-mile deliveries (Ahmad 2020; Balakrishnan, P. 2022). Such an arrangement not only maximizes the utilization of vehicles but also benefits workers who may not be readily able to finance expensive vehicles (Philip 2021). These types of rental or leasing models too should be prioritized in India.

Another area of intervention is promoting outcomes-based skilling. Skill development agencies should partner with platform businesses to enable women to earn while they learn. A start has been made wherein platforms have collaborated with India's National Skill Development Corporation and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, among others, to upskill workers including street vendors as they are onboarded to digital platforms (Ramachandran and Raman 2020, 56–64, 71). Such models of skilling, upskilling, and reskilling, in a fast-evolving world of work, is necessary.

Gender inclusion should be mainstreamed in both industry practices and public services across India. To attract and retain more women in the workforce, it is imperative that platforms have gender-inclusive communication, training programmes, and grievance redressal systems. Likewise, public spaces and services too should become gender-inclusive. Large-scale and iterative gender sensitization of traffic police, toll booth operators, men who provide mobility services from driving buses to delivering packages, is the need of the hour. Civic amenities should become gender-inclusive, too. Cities should have well-functioning street lighting, public washrooms, and feeding and lounge areas for women.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that systemic barriers continue to prevent women from engaging in economic activities, especially in the mobility domain, beginning with safety concerns and branching out into occupational stereotypes, family concerns, and the role of women

as caretakers. Further, patriarchal norms, enforced through family and community, restrict women's access to work and social and physical mobility. In the 2020–21 study, thirty per cent of the women interviewed outside the platform economy (n=437) stated lack of permission or support from their family or husbands, and presence of family responsibility as the reason for not joining the platform economy (Raman, Ramachandran and Sindhu 2021, 61). Thus, there are numerous opportunities for the government, civil society, and platforms to work together to help communities overcome their gender biases.

Jayalaxmi's experience also demonstrates how efforts by NGOs and social enterprises can create awareness about the platform economy among low-income families to improve women's economic participation significantly. These efforts must be amplified and supported through volunteering and funds from larger businesses.

The road to inclusive development is a long one and efforts made today may take years to reap results. This, however, spells the need for multitudinous measures and strategic interventions to derive a holistic outcome. Multi-stakeholder efforts are the need of the hour.

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5. Women Resellers in India's Gig Economy: From Access to Confidence*

Achyutha Sharma

Abstract

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations around the gig economy have explored its impact on how we view labour and the skilled workforce globally. In India, both the “gig economy” and gig workers have always existed and been pervasive, especially in the unorganized sectors. Many women in India, especially homemakers who want to work from home, have leveraged platforms like Meesho to enter the commercial realm. The research presented in this chapter shows how women have “negotiated” social permissions to try reselling, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, where digital or mobile access is restricted. It also focuses on what it means for them to use the internet for the Meesho app, or to try reselling or setting up their online business through the platform.

Keywords: gig economy, gig worker, reselling, reseller, Meesho, internet

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a lot of conversation around the gig economy that will impact how we view labour and the skilled workforce globally. In India, both the “gig economy” and gig workers have always existed and been pervasive, especially in the unorganized sectors. From a vegetable vendor, a tea shop server, an artisan, to an entrepreneur, or a reseller on our Meesho¹ platform, workers in the informal sector are at the heart of India's gig economy. Many women in India, especially

* A version of this chapter was previously published on the FemLab blog: <https://femlab.co/2020/08/07/women-resellers-in-indias-gig-economy-from-access-to-confidence/>

¹ <https://meesho.com/>

those who wish to work from home, have leveraged platforms like Meesho to enter the commercial realm.

A reseller is someone who sources a product from a supplier and sells to the end-customer without the parent company or supplier source involved. This is different from a seller (represents a brand/company) or dealer (wholesaler) who doesn't engage with customers directly.

As per the 2018 estimate,² India has approximately 300 million women in the age group of 20–49 years. If we make a conservative estimate that about five per cent of this population is literate to semi-literate women across urban, semi-urban, and rural areas with digital access via mobile phones, then we have a potential reseller who can become a Meesho entrepreneur.³ Meesho brings suppliers and resellers on a social e-commerce platform that manages the end-to-end process from product selection to end-customer delivery. From 2016 to 2021, Meesho has engaged over ten million women on the platform.

A reseller like Geetha,⁴ a thirty-five-year-old homemaker in semi-urban India, uses the Meesho app to select and order products, which she can then sell to end-customers in her area or anywhere in India. Meesho procures the product from the supplier and delivers to the customer on behalf of Geetha. The accumulated commission from all orders is transferred by Meesho to Geetha's account every fortnight. She continues to scale her business (under her brand name, Geetha Style Boutique) with more orders and earns a regular income from the platform. Many such resellers, over a period of time, have gone on to become Meesho entrepreneurs, earning a minimum of INR 20,000–40,000 per month (or \$250–500, equivalent to an urban middle-class individual income in India). Meesho, in some sense, is formalizing women and men “gig workers” from the informal sector by linking them to the formal financial system where the commission from the platform gets transferred to their registered bank accounts. Many of our women resellers never had their own bank account before building their business on Meesho. We encountered rich narratives of how these women felt when they opened a bank account, received their first income, had to make a PAN card (a Permanent Account Number allocated by the Indian Income Tax Department) or paid income tax for the first time. These women found reselling motivating because they were not only earning and contributing

2 <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/population-female-percent-of-total-wb-data.html>

3 Meesho, from 2021, has pivoted to a consumer-focused e-commerce platform, although it continues to allow Meesho entrepreneurs to operate their reselling business.

4 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

to the household income but also contributing to the society (by helping other families living in rural or remote areas shopping for products they wouldn't have had access to before or be even aware of) and the economy (by paying taxes and running their own business).

In order to further the company's key objective of ensuring resellers' success, a user research function was set up to study their motivations and behaviours and dig deeper into problems they may face on the platform or in the course of conducting their business. This involved conducting qualitative, generative research along with UX (user experience) evaluative research, and usability testing of the Meesho platform across product features and user experiences. The results from this study have been insightful for me, to say the least, while leading the user research function at this late growth stage of the business. We have been able to produce actionable insights about our resellers for our product and design teams and build frameworks and models on reseller behaviours, in addition to sharing these insights across functions in the company. I share two such case studies below.

Activation of Resellers

Many women who intend to enter the gig economy and earn an income (however small) don't understand how to proceed after they have downloaded the Meesho app. Many of these new resellers rely on their social network or friends who are already resellers on Meesho to help them understand how the app works and how they can sell products and earn a margin. Meesho wanted to help new users who didn't have their own network to rely on or were unable to learn from video tutorials on the app. This required us to gain an in-depth understanding of their challenges and barriers in relation to using the app. By conducting user-experience studies, we were able to design solutions that simplified their on-boarding experience, creating simple steps to make their first "trial order" to experience the product themselves before selling to others. This led to a ten per cent improvement in activation through simplification steps and trial order solutions.

Referral Programme

We discovered a community of Meesho referrers who started as resellers but discovered early that they preferred referring and supporting other resellers to grow on the platform. These referrers were in majority men

(approximately seventy per cent) that preferred to earn a lower commission of referral through Meesho rather than a higher margin from reselling. These men's preference for referral was because they don't have a lot of time in managing reselling businesses, targeting potential customers (especially women who primarily shop) to sell products. However, referring on an ad-hoc basis or for a specific time in a week was convenient, required lesser effort, and was viewed as a part-time income. Active referrers who earned a regular income from referrals were called "power referrers" that in a majority of cases (approximately sixty-to-sixty-five per cent) turned out to be men. These men started by referring to their wives or women from their family and expanding further in their social network. They also acted as Meesho "ambassadors" who would convince husbands or male members of the family to allow their women to try the app and earn an income. They gave assurances of no investment, no potential fraud or loss to the family, and emphasized that women could run their business and earn an income while managing the household and without leaving the home. We carried out deeper research to understand how power referrers operate, the challenges they face, and their barriers to onboard more women resellers, and how we could expand opportunities under the referral programme. This research also led to fascinating learnings about the gig worker "mindset" amongst men and women in rural and semi-urban regions of India from an anthropological and psychological lens to the applicability in a product-tech industry, which can be scalable. Our insights led to an overhaul of the power referral programme, allowing these power referrers to access the Meesho network of new resellers whom they can mentor/guide to becoming successful entrepreneurs.

Until 2021, before Meesho pivoted towards consumers as an e-commerce platform, we had over two million women actively reselling on our platform. These women are part of the gig economy, a unique case of women resellers on an entrepreneurial journey. I share some of my key learnings below about women as gig workers and how they navigate this journey.

A Woman Reseller's Success is Her Family's Success

Women resellers in our research are not just users; we found evidence of their roles as contributors, influencers, movers, and makers of family and community. For instance, Radha was able to admit her children to a better private school after they had been forced to drop out for a year from a low-budget school when she lost her job. Sunitha, who never had a job or

managed money, started contributing to the household savings after paying some of the family expenses—this was within three months of reselling, which augmented her savings to INR 150,000 (approximately \$2,000) within a year. Pushpa, a housewife who had fallen into depression due to a lack of opportunities and self-doubt, gained self-confidence through Meesho's reselling platform. Our qualitative research uncovered that the motivations and ideas of success for women resellers went beyond earning an income to acquiring new skills, building self-identity, confidence, and personal development. Women entrepreneurs in the reselling context as “gig workers” have found success in terms of earned income and self-confidence, translating this to hope and inspiration within the family or household. These women have included their husbands or male family members in their reselling business as men are often primary decision-makers in India, and are also considered primary contributors to the family/household finances. Hence, women find it imperative in such an inequitable social construct, to carefully navigate these socio-cultural norms and include these primary decision-makers as part of the reselling business to ensure their success.

Managing the Household and Scaling Their Business

Based on our marketing insights, the popular search terms among women and men for “gigs” across regions in India are: “earn from home,” “working from home,” or “earning extra income.” Meesho used these terms to target potential resellers through marketing and digital ads, especially focusing on women. Our qualitative research also confirms that women resellers who are looking to work from home or earn extra income had discovered the Meesho platform through social media or an online search. These “acquired” (new/recently onboarded on Meesho) women resellers on our platform are very clear about their intent in balancing household responsibilities with running their reselling business. They are not willing to compromise either, especially if they have found reselling personally fulfilling, beyond earning an income. Their idea of managing time is not based on specific hours of reselling work, but rather multi-tasking between household responsibilities and scaling or managing their reselling business. Many women have actively found support from their spouse and other family members to manage household chores, their business orders, and customers.

Digital Access to Digital Confidence

Often, women, no matter their background, have lacked exposure or opportunity to run a business. Our research highlighted that women have “negotiated” social permissions to try reselling, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where digital or mobile access for them is restricted. They negotiate permissions with their husbands or family decision-makers (father/mother) to get their own mobile device, using the internet for the Meesho app, or to try reselling or setting up their online business through the platform. The family agrees with the intent that women would try this business while staying at home and managing household responsibilities at the same time. Thus, the women and their families are both building trust with Meesho and the reselling business to see if this way of earning is legitimate.

This digital access leads to women using the Meesho app on a daily basis and over a period of time, gaining a measure of “digital confidence.” This finding was backed up during our evaluative research and usability testing where women demonstrated greater confidence in their use of the app and were able to complete tasks in a shorter time than expected. This also depended on what stage of reselling they were at and their app usage frequency—whether they were new, intermediate, or experienced resellers. Many women who gained access to their own mobile devices had only Meesho, WhatsApp, and YouTube apps to begin their journey of digital proficiency.

Our approach to designing a quality user experience is closely aligned with the women resellers’ journey of learning and using the app to gain confidence, both in the process of reselling and with the platform.

An example would be the activation solution mentioned earlier in this chapter, to help women with simplified steps of trial order before reselling. The goal of our research outputs being integrated in product and design solutions had three main directions:

Depth-focused research: Interaction with users, agile or “quick and dirty” research can only surface the obvious problems and may not exclude user and stakeholder biases. It is critical to do more foundational, deeper, and longitudinal (continuous) research applying an anthropological, sociological, and psychological lens to build depth in understanding our users. This has helped us unearth problems and turned these findings into clear, actionable insights that made the solution obvious across teams/among stakeholders.

Maintaining user centricity: Probably the most difficult part when multiple teams are involved over a period of time across iterations of solution to

execution. The end-result may not reflect the original user problem that needed to be solved or may reveal that the product/feature is not intuitive for target users. However, as researchers within an organizational context, while we continue to “consult” business, product, and design teams across the product development lifecycle, we strive to maintain user centrality for sustainable impact.

Designing a seamless core experience: In a product-tech industry, post-growth stage companies have several product and design teams working in specific charters within a business vertical. These teams are focused on solving charter-based problems, leading to a tunnel vision which restricts stakeholders to comprehend problems holistically. Researchers actively think and work cross-charter and cross-vertical to comprehend and evaluate a seamless experience from the user's point of view. We need to consider how a reseller would login, discover products, select and checkout/order the products, while also including their post-order experience (product delivery and experience), which is the reseller's core seamless experience.

Our research found women resellers to be highly motivated users who gave us inputs, ideas, and insights towards their challenges, barriers, and intent. They have a participatory approach and unintentionally influence us about better user experience on the Meesho platform.

Some of our learnings while observing their behaviours and actions on the Meesho app are:

The association of outside-app behaviour/activities with in-app behaviour and actions: Women resellers have to manage the household and family responsibilities while running their reselling business, which can become hectic and stressful. Optimizing their time is thereby critical. Hence, managing their time, organizing business activities during specific slots of time, and in-app explorations and actions reserved for another time slot helped these women to maintain the balance of family and business. Understanding their off-app business activities was equally important to interpret or correlate them with their in-app comprehension, behaviours, decisions, and actions.

For example, when we were building an engagement product roadmap for women users, we did a deep dive into their daily, weekly, and monthly routines to understand their time optimization behaviours. We uncovered how these women explored the Meesho app for engagement and entertainment activities, which they found relevant and valuable between their chores and business tasks. We also discovered how family members of women resellers participated in sharing product images to convince end-customers or tracking and coordinating orders with our delivery partners, which were

off-app activities. We then built solutions and redesigned a few features for ease in product sharing and shareable formats for order tracking that was accessible in devices other than the women resellers'.

Being heard helps women overcome socio-cultural conditioning: Often in research and in designing solutions, we assume that users would be able to comprehend their problems and clearly articulate them. The ground reality is quite different, where users usually communicate their challenges with inherent biases, lacking context in problem definition, and little realization or comprehension with their own actions. This becomes a larger problem among Global South users and Indian users from rural or semi-urban regions where English language proficiency is low and reading comprehension in local languages is also limited.

Hence, it is critical to build rigour in research, where we incorporate and consider biases or constraints of users through a robust discussion guide. The line of probing in research needs to be observant, perceptive, and adaptive. Many women resellers were shy, hesitant, or lacked confidence due to socio-cultural conditioning and/or low language proficiency during our early interviews. However, women resellers compensate or overcome these constraints with high motivation and a willingness to engage, making their voice heard with regard to their business challenges using Meesho. They surmount their challenges by trusting the researchers' approach but also, more importantly, through their own motivation to contribute to the Meesho platform.

We often talk about user empathy loosely without understanding the nuances or actions that we need to adopt. Our ability to unearth deeper and actionable insights that can create meaningful solutions, accommodating several socio-cultural constraints faced by our women resellers in hinterland across India, is only possible if we can go deep enough to understand and interpret their inputs carefully.

Leveraging existing product constructs that lead to discovery of new opportunities: The nature of social commerce and reselling business makes women resellers engage with the Meesho app on a daily basis, ranging from three to eight hours in a day. This deeper engagement led to many women resellers exploring the app features or "real estates" (e.g., digital properties and spaces like banners, category pages, offer sections) with two main intents. First, how to comprehend and proficiently use features that allow them to save time and discover real estates which lead to new trending products for their end-customers. Second, over time, they move from engaging to leveraging the Meesho app which helps them become not just discoverers but also curators of products for their end-customers.

Women resellers, on almost a daily basis, are trying to curate a range of relevant and “trendy” products for their end-customers, many of whom are from rural and remote regions in India. When these women leverage product constructs that have a specific use, they sometimes present a different purpose that we had anticipated. Our research led us to pivot and improve or introduce features that catered to the resellers’ new purpose and discard the original intent of the construct. For example, the Meesho app had a community construct (a dedicated real estate and on the main menu) which was meant for resellers to have individual “business” profiles to connect with each other, engage informally on starting reselling, and growing their business. These resellers started sharing more of their grievances related to their respective product orders, the responses to which we incorporated into the “help” section, and included informal chats such as quizzes, entertainment-focused images, jokes, or reselling-focused queries, especially for top resellers. Over time, they started sharing their curated catalogues with each other with a new intent to discover better, relevant, high-quality, top-selling, or trending products through other resellers. This led to a pivot in the community construct as a social shopping (or curated) behaviour and we improved and introduced a few features to enable them in discovery of other resellers’ curation of products.

Women resellers, especially from rural and semi-urban regions in the country, represent a unique case of India’s gig economy. Our data and research have generated evidence that women resellers stand to gain considerably from platforms that are responsively designed. Their success is based on their ability to influence a potentially large base of customers and continually engage them in building a sustainable business. This is because women in India not only have strong relationships, or influence with their relatives or close friends, but when supported by responsive tools, can acquire the ability to negotiate better with family on existing patriarchal norms and structures, and forge new relationships with strangers, among communities, social networks, or circles across regions.

About the Author

Achyutha Sharma (achyuthasharma@gmail.com) has over seventeen years of experience in Research, Brand, and Design, and is currently leading user research at Meesho. He has worked across themes in the social sector, understanding the billion people of India (BoP) demographic, in addition to commercial retail experience gaining depth of insights on Indian consumers.

6. Whisper Networks and Workarounds: Negotiating Urban Company's Interface

Sai Amulya Komarraju

Abstract

Most scholarship on the digital platform economy focuses on the unfair practices of platforms and exploitation of workers. This chapter foregrounds the difficulties workers face in dealing with middle-class customers. Drawing on my interviews with beauty gig workers in Hyderabad, I explore the use of WhatsApp groups by workers and the subsequent creation of whisper networks to collectivize, resist, and exercise agency. The term “whisper network” refers to a thriving system of informal communication amongst women to warn each other about male sexual predators within their immediate environment. Departing from the dominant notion that men are the subjects of whisper networks, this chapter uses an intersectional feminist lens to broaden its scope to include caste and class.

Keywords: whisper networks, Urban Company, caste, platform economy, collectivization, solidarity

Introduction

Picture this—nine women cramped into an auto (three-wheeler vehicle in India), taking a *savari* (‘ride’ in Hindi) to their workplace. Two women in *saris* on either side of the driver, three on the seat at the rear actually meant for people to occupy, three on the little wooden slab facing it, fitted to accommodate more people, and one on the iron railing bordering the right side of the auto. The crisis of public transportation (Pucher et al. 2004)

in India forces the working poor to travel in overcrowded buses, trucks, seven-seaters, and auto rickshaws (Jose 2019).

Perhaps the image is somewhat overwhelming in the present context of the pandemic and the mantra of SMS (sanitizing, masks, social distancing), but this is how domestic workers travelled in the BC (Before Corona) era, or so I discovered when I interviewed domestic workers as part of a summer course in 2018 (Friedman 2020).

Brinda,¹ a domestic worker in my neighbourhood, told me how this “auto” arrangement came to fruition. Experiences of harassment (such as being stalked at bus stops), she said, were a common occurrence, and it is this that brought the community of domestic workers in her area to team up to find a solution. They identified a few drivers and struck a deal with them. Six drivers would ferry groups of eight to nine domestic workers each, to and from work. Every passenger would have to contribute INR 8 to 10 per ride (14¢). Brinda also introduced me to her other “auto-mates” who corroborated her story with experiences of their own.

These shared auto rides provide opportunities for the group to discuss a variety of issues related to work, trade stories, and brainstorm solutions as a mini-collective. En route to the workplace (a fifteen- to thirty-minute ride depending on traffic), they would discuss how much each of them earned to fix the “going rate” for their labour in a particular area. It is only reasonable, they argued, that people living in “posh” areas (perceived to be a mix of commercial and residential) pay more than those living in purely residential areas, often categorized as low-income neighbourhoods. They would also discuss the added benefits of working for a particular family, what infrastructure they expected to already be there in a home (washing machine or a mop), and how they could negotiate issues of leave, including getting one of their travel companions to substitute for them. It is also during these auto rides, Maniamma says, that the unspoken rule of not “snatching” work from a fellow worker became a common understanding. As a group, they also decided that a three-day paid leave per month was not only reasonable, but if these days off were not utilized, they could ask to be paid a bonus.

Older and more experienced workers, they said, would warn those new to the trade against working in a particular home during these auto *savaris* (rides). Information about those who were known to abuse their “servant” (whether physically or mentally), was passed on to the new workers. Some of the workers who spoke with me also mentioned abuse but not always as

1 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

having themselves suffered it. The abuse and exploitation (both physical and sexual) of domestic workers is reported in the media, but few lodge a formal complaint (Krishnakutty 2020; Agrawal 2020). Most domestic workers are either not aware of the legal provision (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013) or on account of belonging to non-dominant castes and communities (such as tribal minorities), feel a fight with big people is a losing battle (Saldanha 2017).

The steady rise of on-demand, care-work platforms such as Bookmybai² and Urban Company³ (UC) complicates matters further since platform work is marked by newer forms of precarity—work instability, worker isolation, information asymmetries about ratings, job matching, blended supervision (Komarraju et al. 2021) amongst other things that “seriously weakens workers’ collective organisation [...] by triggering individual and collective anxiety about the future” (Grimshaw et al. 2016, 29).

However, as recent protests by beauty gig workers associated with Urban Company suggest, despite constraints, workers find ways to collectivize and protest. In this chapter, I take a different approach to understand how workers resist and organize themselves. By pointing to the difficulties service providers face on account of the master-slave relationship, characteristic of home-based, platformized care-work (Komarraju et al. 2021), I shift attention to the often-neglected issue of the customer-service provider relationship. Drawing on interviews with beauty gig workers in Hyderabad, I point to the creation of “whisper networks” amongst workers⁴ to deal with exploitation by both the platform and customers. While most academic scholarship treats men as the subject of such networks, this chapter uses an intersectional feminist lens to broaden the scope of whisper networks.

Savari: More than a Ride

The lack of comprehensive laws to empower informal and unorganized workers in general and gig workers in particular (especially against extra-legal mechanisms by the platforms) further exacerbates issues of precarity and exploitation (Rajkumar 2020). However, one must refrain from homogenizing groups of people as oppressed and powerless (Spivak 2010), especially because those who occupy positions of power cannot understand how women on the

2 <https://www.bookmybai.com>

3 <https://www.urbancompany.com>

4 Or simply providers, short for service providers.

margins (whose views we centre) exercise agency (Komarraju et al. 2021). This is why the metaphor of the *savari* is interesting: It represents both the literal travel involved and the travel from an individualized experience requiring personalized mechanisms (such as negotiating wages) to that of shared experiences and a collective redressal of issues (however small or informal the effort of collectivization).

In India, trade unions are arguably the most dominant way of collectivizing, given their strong ties with political parties (Elembilassery 2018). The *savari* metaphor effectively broadens how collectivization can be imagined beyond this narrow framework of unionization, and honours women's ways of knowing and sharing. Where trade unions are indeed a manifestation of one kind of collectivization, at FemLab, we wondered if it is possible to identify, and/or energize and enhance informal collectivizations (like the auto *savari* groups) that might already be happening across sectors via digital technologies. For instance, domestic workers' organizations and unions in Indonesia, Thailand, and Hong Kong have used mobile phones and the internet to create virtual solidarities, mobilize themselves to protest against discriminatory laws (such as the proposed minimum two-year contract at a placement agency), and document abuse (Smales 2010).

Closer home, Gurugram-based beauty gig workers were able to mobilize themselves to protest against unfair practices by UC through WhatsApp groups (Mehrotra 2022). While the Gurugram protests in October 2021 received extensive media coverage, there has been little to no coverage about the Hyderabad workers' protest in 2020. Archana, one of the beauty gig workers who led this protest, gave us insights into how women were able to collectivize against all odds. She also clued us in about how WhatsApp groups served as the main tool for mobilizing themselves and protesting outside UC's office in Hyderabad.

Despite the risk of their partner IDs being blocked, workers are still able to find opportunities to collectivize in whatever capacity, with whatever tools available to them. While protests are an example of how workers exercise agency, it is worthwhile to ask what are the main issues of discussion on these groups—to what end are these groups created and sustained?

Since FemLab focuses on “communicative ecologies” of women, our interest is in how media and communication tools are embedded in people's everyday lives, allowing us to capture a non-dichotomous view (public-private, personal-professional, friends-family, work-leisure) of women workers' engagement with technology, leading to insights that may be easy to miss if one were to approach it from a typical ICT4D approach (Tacchi 2015).

WhatsApp Groups: Worker Isolation to Collectivization

We believe it is important to acknowledge that workers are affiliated with multiple communities and networks (these could be caste-based communities or professional communities), leading to the creation of several WhatsApp groups. Each beauty gig worker is a part of several networks of workers and WhatsApp groups. She is a node in the matrix, an actor who may or may not know all the other actors in the network.

As an on-demand home-based care-work platform that connects service providers and customers through leads, UC selects its service providers with care—based on their skills and experience, and vulnerability. Women who are divorced, abandoned, widowed and have a family to look after, or have other kinds of financial obligations (such as loans) are preferred, since they would not be able to leave the platform even if they wish to (Raval and Pal 2019). These selected providers then undergo an intensive training programme to transform themselves into professionals. They are informed about ratings and reviews, but it is only when they start working that they realize the full import of blended supervision (Komarraju et al. 2021). Low ratings would mean undergoing a mandatory retraining programme, valuable time that could have been better spent earning money, says Archana.

Beauty workers who have trained or retrained together, those who are part of a single hub, those who were friends even before joining the platform, come together to form WhatsApp groups. It is through these groups that isolated workers are able to communicate with each other:

In WhatsApp groups, they will have funny chats, if someone has some problem, they will discuss that. If there is too much torture from any client, they will discuss that. If there is any update from the company, they will inform that “such is the update, what can we do about it,” each one will give their solution or suggestion. Sometimes petty fights will also keep happening (Archana, UC service provider, Personal interview).

It is the emergence of these forms of solidarities that indicate the potential of social media platforms in addressing worker isolation and information asymmetry or even sharing about particularly troublesome customers who are known to harass service providers.

From our conversations with beauty gig workers (both male and female), commissions, new subscription plans, offering discounts without consulting the providers, expansion of hubs, lack of emergency funds in case of accidents or other medical emergencies, and difficulties in understanding how ratings

could take an overall dip, emerged as some of the main issues that are discussed in these groups. When the escalation of these issues to the managerial level in Hyderabad did not lead to any kind of resolution, workers were forced to protest and lodge a case against UC at a local Police Station in Hyderabad.

Apart from these grievances, a rarely discussed issue in the public discourse, that of customer attitude and behaviour, was also foregrounded by the providers. Couched in statements like “not all customers are the same” (Arti, UC service provider), are very real issues of being treated with no dignity by middle-class customers, such as not being allowed to access the washroom:

Customers are of all kinds. Some are good, some are bad. Some are like, see we go to fill water in the bathroom, or drain the pedicure machine, wash stuff, but we aren't allowed to use the bathroom. It is strange. Usually we are careful, since we can indicate slots, we make time for food and bathroom breaks. But in winters, especially evenings, when it is too cold, or in summers when we drink a lot of water. Some customers don't like it. I am not saying all customers, some are like that. Some are really nice and offer tea and coffee. Some are like this (Bhanu, UC service provider, Personal interview).

In addition to sweeping and mopping the area in which services were rendered, UC established a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) during the pandemic:

After all this [services], we will again sanitize the area, that is what ever things we made use of such as stool, chair or bed or tap in the washroom which we have used or doorbell, door handle etc. We have to spray Sanitiser on everything (Sangeetha, UC service provider, Personal interview).

This SOP has to be diligently followed by all service providers in order to obtain the required “hygiene rating” from customers. The idea that pros must “sanitize” whatever they come into contact with or not being allowed to use washrooms cannot be untangled from the discourses of caste and polluting bodies in India. As most scholarship on social distancing during the pandemic note (such as Dey 2020) given the history of sanitation workers in India, the stigma and social ostracization they face on account of dealing with “waste,” the sanitizing of objects that one comes into contact with (indeed, if they even have the right to touch objects that are not their own) or not being allowed to use washrooms are inseparable from that of caste.

Some customers, providers say, are overly critical of their services, pick fights with providers to avoid payment, list several services in the booking but cancel the more expensive ones, and don't allow them to use their mobile phones while at work. Often this isn't explicitly stated but providers learn to read customers' body language, tone, and other behavioural tells to not risk low ratings:

You don't use the phone while at the customer's. I put it on silent and I don't want calls when I am at the customer's place, I don't even take a look at the phone. When I take a call that very urgent call, only then I take, some customers do get angry (Sangeetha, UC service provider, Personal interview).

Archana, one of the lead protestors, says:

Some people are too much, we start feeling is this day mine or not [not being in charge of their day, and in extension, lives], such people will be there. When we get good people we feel very happy but there will be a problem with a few people. Mostly we will try to do the service calmly and come back (Personal interview).

Some of the customers leave providers so frustrated and humiliated that Archana says, "We feel it is torture but for the sake of ratings we have to do. Just for the sake of ratings, whatever their behaviour may be like, we have to accept it."

While UC can be accommodating if providers raise an issue before beginning a service, any conflict between the customer and provider results in the customer being offered a discount:

If we have any problem at the customer point, if we call the company, they will say "you pack your items and leave that place," they will speak to the client as well. But this has to happen before starting work. If the problem happens after we have started work and then speak to the company also, our ratings will be in the hands of the customer (Archana, UC service provider, Personal interview).

The platform doesn't normally take action against individual complaints raised by providers. It is only when several women providers complain about a particular customer or if they refuse bookings from a person repeatedly, does the company call service providers for feedback, and only if it

is established that the customer is indeed a repeat offender, does their ID get blocked.

Some of the customers' behaviour is described as "torture" and "vulgar," so much so that providers often report about these customers in their WhatsApp groups, a mechanism they have found more effective in forcing UC to acknowledge that there is a problem.⁵ In such cases, WhatsApp groups function as whisper networks that help women warn one another about potential abusers.

Intersectional Feminist Lens: Expanding the Scope of Whisper Networks

Whisper networks are usually described as an informal system of communication meant to warn/alert fellow women about "men who need to be watched because of rumours, allegations or known incidents of sexual misconduct, harassment or assault" (Meza 2017). They function "as informal feminist justice networks" (Rentschler 2018, 505; Powell 2015) and these networks exist across industries—academia, media, entertainment, and so on.

As McDermott (2017) notes, whisper networks are a function of and not a solution to toxic environments. In the absence of legal mechanisms to lodge formal complaints or when these mechanisms fail to hold men accountable, women rely on whisper networks for validation and solidarity (Peterson 2017). Digital technologies help scale-up these issues with such speed that they eventually lead to movements like #MeToo and #Losha⁶ (Donegan 2018; Gajjala 2018). Typically, men are often the subjects of these networks in both popular discourse and academic scholarship. Even though harassment is defined in broad terms, inclusive of verbal, non-verbal, physical, and mental, rarely is there an attempt to examine experiences of harassment, abuse, and exploitation from the lens of gender, caste, class, and often religion, to expand the scope of whisper networks.

For instance, the apathy that middle-class women customers have towards providers belonging to marginalized communities and their issues, and

5 Urban Company has now decided to initiate a customer sensitization programme: <https://entrackr.com/2021/10/week-after-women-led-protests-urban-company-slashes-commission/>

6 A crowdsourced List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) compiled by Raya Sakar in 2017, which raised questions about due process and generational divides amongst feminists in India. For more, read Gita Chadha's (2017) insights: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/towards-complex-feminist-solidarities-list-statement>

the way they are treated inside customers' homes cannot be understood in terms of gender alone, but also in terms of caste and class. Historically, the Brahmanical discourses of purity and impurity and ritually polluting bodies dictate the boundaries of what a woman worker from marginalized caste and class can and cannot touch, and what work she can and cannot do (Sarukkai 2009).

It is here that an intersectional feminist lens that is sensitive to the dimensions of gender, caste, and class lends us the necessary theoretical tool to widen the scope of whisper networks. Caste, class, and religion play an important role in home-based services since such work is characterized by the master-slave relationship. It is here that we get a glimpse of how providers resist exploitation by both the platform and customers. Worker agency can take many forms—protests that are oppositional, and other subtler, covert ways in which it is expressed—such as forming WhatsApp groups and creation of whisper networks.

Just as auto rides serve as a space for collectivization, WhatsApp groups function as a space where these issues are discussed. Women partners warn one another about particularly difficult customers. Since no one knows which customer is assigned until the partner has accepted the booking, often partners bear cancellation charges rather than provide their services because these women would anyway not give them a good rating, leading to an overall dip in their ratings, which leads to disappointment on part of the workers and also to their IDs being blocked. These whisper networks are incredibly important to avoid a domino effect on the physical, mental, and financial well-being of the partner.

Conclusion

It is crucial to note that these WhatsApp groups, much like the auto *savari* groups, aren't created for any instrumental purposes (such as collectivization). They are created to discuss their personal lives, opportunities for work, forward messages or memes, update each other about policies related to UC, features launched, and even share information about difficult customers, thereby serving as a knowledge-sharing platform.

Following the communicative ecologies' approach from an intersectional feminist lens also means that we necessarily move away from the utilitarian or developmental angle that pays little or no attention whatsoever to the leisure-oriented practices of the "third-world" populations (Arora 2012, 2); acknowledge multiple, non-dichotomic identities such that women are

human beings, workers, friends, and members of many communities; and as members of multiple communities with multiple identities, they are positioned variously within power relations—experiencing exploitation as well as exercising agency.

The feminist approach views workers/providers as more than their work or more than “just service providers,” they are people who experience life fully in all its complexity. Their WhatsApp groups, therefore, are not meant for the sole purpose of mobilization, but leisure, levity, petty fights, and of course, to function as whisper networks. This approach “rehumanizes” workers, a move that is critical in economies that are increasingly being platformized and algorithmized.

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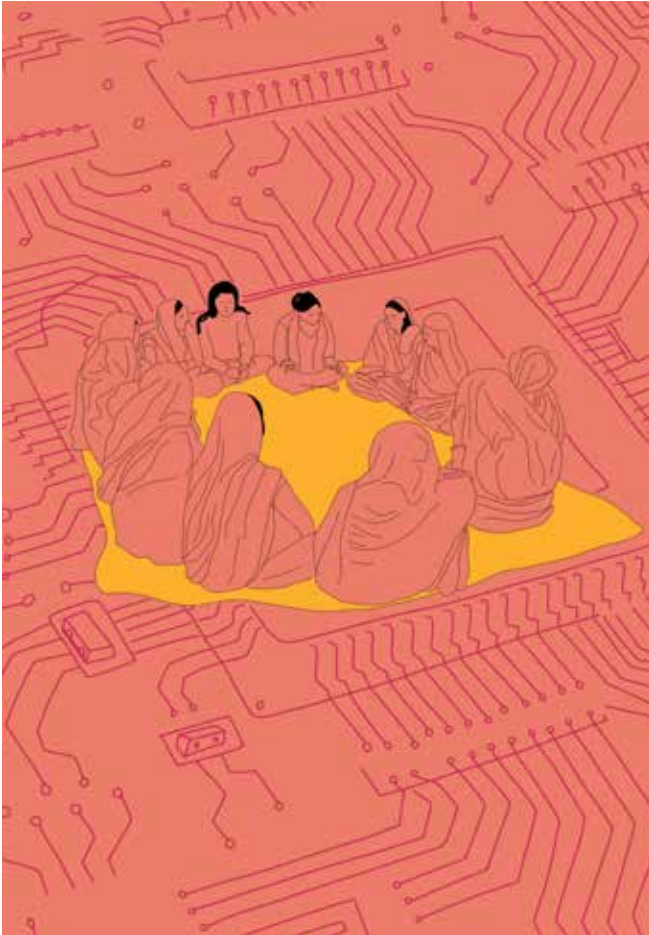
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Governance



7. Entrepreneurs Craft the Future of Collective Artisanal Economies in Bangladesh¹

Upasana Bhattacharjee

Abstract

This chapter explores the platformization of crafts and artisanal work in Bangladesh. As digitization and e-commerce are hailed as modes of regenerating in an industry caught between automation anxiety and cultural revival, social entrepreneurship emerges as the agent driving such transformations. In a country where a limited section of the population can access the internet, social entrepreneurs and artist entrepreneurs represent two different agents that can capitalize on changes in the artisanal sector. But discourses and structural transformations relying on such individualistic actors, I argue, are not well-suited for the artisanal sector in Bangladesh. Artisanal work has geographically located histories that have evolved through collective practices. Narratives centred around entrepreneurship leave little space and agency for collective actors for whom cultural revival is not rhetoric for national pride but a question of livelihood.

Keywords: artisanal work, Bangladesh, informal work, cultural revival, platformization, creative work

Introduction

As COVID-19 brought businesses and livelihoods to a standstill in Bangladesh, several sectors had to rely on the internet to keep functioning.

¹ A version of this chapter was previously published in the Global Dev Blog: <https://globaldev.blog/blog/will-e-commerce-revive-bangladesh%E2%80%99s-artisanal-economy>

Traditional artisans were among those compelled to go online to sell their crafts, clothing, and jewellery, either individually or as part of a collective. Oftentimes, these collectives partner with existing boutiques and small businesses that rely on social media for sales. Against this backdrop of increased online activity in the sector of craft and artisanal work, it is worth looking closely at this emergent form of entrepreneurship in the creative economy in Bangladesh.

Craft and artisanal work have traditionally been collective activities, rooted in geographic locations (often rural areas) and tied closely to the availability of resources, local traditions, and aesthetics. The artisanal sector, broadly comprising craft work, handlooms, and garment work, has been affected by labour migration, urbanization, eroding resources, and absent linkages (Sharmin and Hossain 2020). National attention to a sector that has seen decline over the past few decades has come in phases and is marked by the rhetoric of heritage revival. This is shaped by political agendas, policy frameworks, labour laws, and private sector initiatives. The sector is closely connected to cultural heritage and traditional arts/crafts in the country, and has historically evolved through local knowledge and customs of artisanal communities. For instance, the process of weaving *Jamdani saris*, a form of handloom, is intricate and long, and usually involves several craftspeople. *Nakshi Kantha* is a form of quilt-making, popular in rural Bangladesh, wherein women come together to embroider and make quilts, enjoying a space of leisure away from their domestic duties and roles (Banu 2009; Chen 1984).

Such recognition and articulation of collectives centre them in processes of crafts and artisanal work. The evolution of artisanal work and products is thus deeply tied to collectives and their relationships with geography and culture. Centring collectives in these conversations also makes space to talk about joint activism and mobilization of workers for visibility and informal organizing for social change (Kapoor 2007). But how does a nation participate in the digital creative economy, centred on individual entrepreneurship while acknowledging its legacy in collectives producing crafts? In this chapter, based on interviews with the upper management of organizations working in the artisanal sector in Bangladesh and content analysis of their websites, I explore the emergence of and factors shaping the narrative of revival of artisanal work. I argue that as digitization and e-commerce are hailed as modes of regenerating an industry caught between automation anxiety and cultural revival, social entrepreneurship has emerged as an agent driving such transformations, at the cost of collective voices and representations of craftwork.

Women Entrepreneurs in E-commerce

Over the course of the pandemic, Bangladesh has seen an upsurge in the number of women signing up to be entrepreneurs online, with the number of social media users seeing a twenty-five per cent increase between 2020 and 2021 (Kemp 2021). Some women entrepreneurs had explored online marketplaces in the past, and as COVID-19 increased the overall dependence on the internet (as a marketplace and as a medium for exchange and learning), a lot of them saw an increase in their sales and engagement. Based on interviews with a few such sellers, *The Dhaka Tribune*, a leading national daily in Bangladesh, reported that the Women and E-Commerce Forum of Bangladesh (WE) had been a catalyst in their success (Irani, B. 2020).

The WE, an organization that began in 2017 in the wake of Digital Bangladesh initiatives, has been training entrepreneurs and organizing certificate courses for them. Gradually, the organization started focusing on e-commerce and entrepreneurship. WE's website² speaks about its commitment to social development that is driven by women, particularly through digitalization.

Facebook as the Virtual Creative Economy

Most women entrepreneurs who are part of WE sell through Facebook pages. With their catalogues online, Facebook pages become a site for marketing and selling their products. Facebook is a popular social media platform in Bangladesh with 67.245 million users. While no substantial data is available on the number of such pages on Facebook, WE reports that there are 400K+ women entrepreneurs and over a million members on Facebook.³ Academic work on social media as sites of e-commerce highlight that in developing countries, these have become avenues for livelihood, creating a class of Digital Subsistence Entrepreneurs, who pursue online entrepreneurship opportunities for survival. Social media sites such as Facebook enable people to identify business opportunities, construct markets, build trust within communities and with potential customers, and create value (Camacho and Barrios 2022). Different aspects of platform architecture and affordances (such as content visibility to public/private lists, time periods for the availability of content, modes of engagement, nature of audience, etc.) determine

2 <https://weforumbd.com/>

3 <https://weforumbd.com/about-us>

how people use social media to present and manage their identity online (DeVito et al. 2017).

Pages for boutiques and businesses (predominantly clothing, jewellery, and handicraft) are often in Bengali. Their pages list WhatsApp phone numbers through which orders are booked and finalized. While digital platforms act as mediums that intermediate transactions and audiences, the market targeted here are Bangladeshis who are socio-economically well-off with access to internet and smartphones. Even as craft and artisanal work is beginning to get more attention from state and private bodies, individual sellers communicate in Bengali, implying that the audience they envision is one rooted within Bangladesh as well as their global diasporas, and that they might not be vying for recognition in typical Global North-centred international craft markets.

Social Entrepreneurs Drive Cultural Revival and Place-Making

The vision of an international representation of Bangladesh's craftwork is rather wide, shared by both state and private bodies. As an entrepreneur⁴ working with muslin weavers explained:

But to me Muslin also became an example of reviving multiple issues. One was reviving identity, that we should be proud of what we had in the past. [...] So, such an enormous brand comes from the villages of a country. Before [the] internet, before newspapers, before iPhones and all that, [this was] such a strong identity. The value of that identity and the power of that identity that moved the country back to having an association with this identity. So that was an important part of reviving our heritage (Personal interview).

The last few years have seen the emergence of digital platforms that work with artisans and collectives on skilling and selling their products online. Some platforms focus primarily on equipping artisanal communities with the training and resources to accommodate automation, technology, and digital platforms, and others focus on the process of craft (sourcing materials, labour, space, profitability) and making it more profitable.

Platforms in this landscape are caught between two different forces. The first is that of cultural revival. Cultural artefacts play a crucial role

4 All names used in this chapter have been withheld to protect identity.

in processes of place-making. Place as identity, pride, and belonging is articulated through cultural symbols and processes that represent specific geographic locations. In an increasingly globalized world, place-making is contentious both in terms of authority and claim—what constitutes culture and who gets to claim it? As such, cultural symbols, artefacts, and processes transform into performances and commodities. Through architecture, heritage walks, religious and traditional events, literary, art, and craft festivals, the relationship between people, local culture, and places is (re)invented and asserted (Singh 2018). Reviving traditional arts, crafts, and cultural products assumes urgency because of their significance as symbols of national heritage and cultural identity. Government schemes and policies, thus, do not just invest in the revival of artisanal production but in the production of a cultural identity as well. In trying to revive the artisanal sector, the agenda is also to renew the cultural identity and national pride they provide. Reviving the artisanal sector becomes a process of restoring past glory and national identity.

The second is the threat of worker displacement that automation poses. Machine interventions are primarily at the entry level, and as this is dominated by a female workforce. So, the threat of worker displacement is largely gendered in nature. Further contributing to these threats are patterns in hiring and management that favour male workers in training and technical skills (Sakamoto and Krasley 2019). These forces in the background shape the emergence and operations of platforms in the artisanal sector.

Digital platforms such as these have social entrepreneurs at the helm. A key characteristic of social entrepreneurship is its use of neoliberal, entrepreneurial means in service of the common good (Gandini et al. 2017). The upper management of a skilling platform for garment workers discussed how the platform was conceptualized:

And so then, you know, she [the founder of the company] also talked to some of the researchers in Bangladesh who are doing researches on the female workers, because you know at one point of time, I would say more than sixty-four per cent of the workforce is constituted by the female, but it is no longer true. Now it's something it's below fifty per cent, right?⁵ Question is that where has that fifteen or fourteen per cent female gone? So that's basically a one point that strike her mind. And she kind of you

5 According to the International Labour Organization, 63.4 per cent of the readymade garment industry workforce of Bangladesh comprised women in 2010, which fell to 61.1 per cent in 2018 (Matsuura and Teng 2020).

know vowed that this is the place where she can do something. So that's how it started [...] and that's basically to help the vulnerable female workers. So that's the bottom line (Personal interview).

Driven strongly by an ethical motive, social entrepreneurs resolve to “change the world” through a largely individualistic ethos (Gandini et al. 2017). Scholars such as Lilly Irani (2019) note that there is an emergent group of “entrepreneurial citizens” in India who are enlisted for national building and establishing markets. Such initiatives and interventions, and the entrepreneurs behind them, operate with a certain capital and privilege as a prerequisite. Without a critical interrogation of the same, it becomes easy to treat such entrepreneurial capacities as ideals and norms, while ignoring the material realities and possibilities of groups and communities lacking similar privileges, working towards development in emerging economies.

Artist-Entrepreneurs in E-commerce

While this trend of emerging platforms converges into the broader goal of recognition for Bangladesh's craftwork in international markets, the trend signals a different approach to that of the WE. They are both trying to weave together cultural identity and social development through the introduction of digital platforms in the craft sector.

Spaces like WE offer opportunities for several artist-entrepreneurs to network and support each other. Gandini, Bandinelli, and Cossu (2017) note that networks of artists and entrepreneurs are redefining what collaboration and community look like in creative work. They argue that community here refers to collaborative approaches to work that embeds social relations within economic networks. Competition and solidarities coexist in the workforce of the creative industries. Both geographical proximities in cities and an online presence through social media are conducive mediums for organizing workers into collectives and building solidarities. While these provide avenues for finding a sense of community, networks, and collectivization, workers acknowledge that there is rivalry and competition amidst them for the same projects and positions (Morgan and Nelligan 2018; Patel 2017).

WE can thus be understood as a network or collective of artist-entrepreneurs. Artist-entrepreneurs, with the increased focus on digitalization, usually represent women who are literate and can access the internet. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 2019, only 8.7 per cent of the poorest twenty per cent households in Bangladesh could access

the internet, compared to 75.3 per cent of their richest twenty per cent (Dhaka Tribune 2020). The popularity of the figure of “women entrepreneur” in mainstream media narratives, whose background is one of struggle, emancipation, and independence (and more implicitly, that of individuality), centres the narrative of the artist-entrepreneur: usually homemakers and women who can access the internet comfortably and can navigate tactics of presenting themselves and their narratives online.

Most of WE's members are entrepreneurs working on clothing, fashion, and crafts. Several women who were able to increase their income through e-commerce in the past year acknowledged that membership in WE played a key role in increasing their engagement and sales (Irani 2020). Membership into the organization is opt-in, and while there is no data on the socio-economic background of the entrepreneurs who are part of WE, news and media coverage mostly speak about women who already had an online presence for their boutiques and crafts businesses.

Media coverage of women entrepreneurs often creates a narrative through their backgrounds and personal lives, highlighting their struggles and difficulties, and discussing how entrepreneurial craftwork has been a process of empowerment and financial independence for them. The presence of a narrative becomes essential to one's professional identity (Morgan and Nelligan 2018). In the case of craftworkers, a narrative that brings forth their private lives into the public domain by making their family, their homes/studios, their positions as wives, mothers, and daughters a central element of their *brand* online. While their craft follows a certain aesthetic online, so does their self-presentation (Luckman 2015).

For instance, any discussion around the revival of Nakshi Kantha, a form of embroidery (on worn clothes) which was popular with women in rural Bangladesh, is incomplete without the mention of Surayia Rahman. Rahman was an artist whose embroidery and *Kantha* designs were highly acclaimed. She worked extensively on teaching Nakshi Kantha embroidery to women in Bangladesh, bringing together their economic empowerment and the Kantha cultural revival. The craftform had seen a decline in the twentieth century and discussions on its revival are incomplete without invoking Rahman's contribution (Ravi 2017). While Rahman's legacy as an artist and crafts activist is crucial to Kantha revival, it is also noteworthy that her background as a woman affected by the partition is invoked in discussions of her contribution. For (artist) entrepreneurs, their work speaks for them, but more interestingly, their personal lives speak for their work as well.

Following the rise of Etsy (an online marketplace for handmade products and crafts) in the Global North, the craft economy went through a phase of

platformization that made online self-presentation or what Luckman (2015, 113) refers to as “self-making,” a necessary strategy for micro-enterprises. This refers to craftworkers presenting a well-rounded version online which includes their craft of course, but also spins their home and family into a cohesive narrative that joins work with the personal and the social. The emotional, performative, and aesthetic labour that goes into maintaining an online image makes craftworkers “people” before workers and businesses.

The extensively strategized self-presentation of creative workers online also determines their ways of engaging with other creative workers, their followers, and their potential audience. Karen Patel (2017) identifies that creative workers endorse, collaborate, and engage with fellow workers on social media in order to signal expertise and attain legitimacy as experts in their fields. Spaces such as the WE, on Facebook and social media, present alternatives for creating solidarities and collaborations in competitive creative industries. Brooke Erin Duffy (2016) shows that social media acts as a way for people to channel affective labour into building a sense of community and a network in their followers—a large number of followers indicating success.

Blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, social media becomes a space of labour instead of pleasure for creative workers. Duffy (2016) identifies a drive to maintain authenticity and an image of realness in creative workers who argue that their work exists at the margins of traditional industries/professions. Personal narratives and an identity that is consistent across social media defines self-presentation online for creative workers. Workers constantly need to balance the making and marketing that goes into their craft. With freelancing being pervasive in the industry, self-management becomes a powerful process that reflects the social and cultural capital workers already possess (Duffy 2016; Hracz and Leslie 2014; Win 2014).

Emancipation and Cultural Preservation: Entrepreneurship to the Rescue?

And thus, in highlighting stories of craftwork that focus on personal struggles and individual victories, the narrative of the artist-entrepreneur (who is literate and internet-savvy) is reiterated—which, while important, becomes dominant. This narrative portrays craft workers as homemakers/women who have access to the internet and social media, and are able to find financial independence and emancipation in e-commerce. Workers who do not share this narrative are invisibilized. These include rural communities that have

historical connections with craft and artisanal work, which depended on their geographical locations, and in turn, was their primary source of income. The consequences are not only discursive, but also material.

This becomes pertinent as we consider the collective nature of craftwork in Bangladesh. Traditionally, the Kantha craftwork was a way for rural women to embroider old and worn out clothes collectively. Taking place in domestic spaces, Kantha was a leisure activity in their own private space, but away from their family responsibilities. Similarly, another prominent artisanal craft in Bangladesh has been the Jamdani, which has an intricate and delicate process of making, involving several people at once. Jamdani garments have been popular and luxurious, having had an international market for centuries, and this is a symbol of national and cultural pride for Bangladesh in international craft (Chen 1984; Akhter and Ullah 2020).

For a sector that began and evolved with collective processes of making, the increasing prevalence of narratives that centre entrepreneurs needs to be interrogated further. The figure of the entrepreneur has become crucial to the agenda of social development in South Asia that depends on the relationship between technological innovations and social values. Norms and practices of entrepreneurship are channelled into an entrepreneurial quality in citizenship that becomes responsible for development and change, without questioning existing social structures (Irani, L. 2019). Through expertise and technological solutions, they are charged with emancipating underprivileged populations. Several academics critique how innovation and disruption are treated as solutions to societal problems (that exist because of deep structural issues) where the interventions do not affect bigger structural issues, and in many cases, misunderstand processes as problems (Irani, L. and Chowdhury 2019; Morozov 2014). Such challenges are critical with increasingly neoliberal transitions that provide private sector-oriented solutions in the absence of direct state involvement (Abraham and Rajadhyaksha 2015).

Conclusion

Narratives that valorize the entrepreneurial spirit display a vision for social development that emphasizes individual risk-taking, drive, and skills. This emphasis on an individualistic entrepreneurial sensibility is favoured by commercial digital platforms (e-commerce and social media) and a state that is receding from the realm of welfare. This suggests a shift in the way the sector is organized, and further threatens the opportunities and survival of vulnerable groups who have historically formed a major portion

of the workforce. These actors and their relationships are thus excluded or invisibilized. Artisanal communities that practised traditional crafts found themselves out of work for several reasons such as migration, urbanization, lack of availability of resources, and absence of linkages with markets and other industries (Sharmin and Hossain 2020; Banu 2009). An entrepreneurial spirit alone is unlikely to be an adequate solution for reviving the sector.

We need to evaluate the circumstances of the revival of craftwork while keeping its history and collective tradition in mind. Through media narratives, digital intermediaries, and commercialization, individual women entrepreneurs who can access the internet attain prominence in the sector, often resulting in the marginalization of already vulnerable groups such as rural communities that have historically depended on crafts and artisanal work for survival. These largely emulate patterns of craftwork and platformization in the Global North that centre individual artist-entrepreneurs who manage their self-presentation online in addition to their craft and products.

Communities traditionally working in the crafts sector have been grappling with unemployment, inadequate skilling, eroding resources, and absent linkages. We need to attend to such interdependent structural issues by asking the tough questions—who gets to be empowered by the digitization of the craft industry? What kinds of ethical global value chains can we ask for if we want an inclusive and sustainable marketplace? These require targeted state-led solutions that address industry linkages, markets, and knowledge preservation. The sector needs broader social initiatives and mobilization to address profit-sharing and the significance of crafts in the public sphere. We need a new vocabulary of agency for collectives, craftspeople, and workers in the sector that centres their needs and experiences.

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8. Enabling Women’s Digital Participation: The Case for Meaningful Connectivity

Radhika Radhakrishnan, Ana María Rodríguez Pulgarín, & Teddy Woodhouse

Abstract

This chapter explores the size and consequences of the digital gender gap in terms of meaningful connectivity to the internet. The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) defines meaningful connectivity (MC) on the basis of the connection speed, device functionality, data allowances, and frequency of use of a user’s internet connection. By using this multi-dimensional approach to measuring internet access, A4AI arrives at a deeper and granular understanding of the connectivity gaps that keep people—especially women—from harnessing the full potential of the internet. We present survey results from nine countries where A4AI estimated levels of meaningful connectivity disaggregated by gender that would not have been visible if a binary measure for internet connectivity would have been used to assess levels of internet access. Beyond infrastructure, we also argue that contextual factors, such as socio-cultural and economic barriers, disproportionately prevent women (and other marginalized groups) from benefitting from a meaningful internet connection.

Keywords: gender, internet access, meaningful connectivity, ICT4D, digital gender gap

It is no longer enough to just be online. The collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a wide rift of digital experiences based on the kind of internet access someone has. Just as internet access has

been unequally distributed throughout the world along the lines of gender, geography, and income, so, too, have these experiences been unequally felt.

This chapter explores the depth of this inequality and proposes a policy framework—meaningful connectivity—as a means for further measurement and analysis of the digital gender gap. This framework builds from the limitations of other current measurement strategies for digital access, as discussed below. From initial research from the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), the meaningful connectivity framework suggests an important step from basic access to something more substantial where internet access translates into greater probability of doing essential activities—such as accessing healthcare, taking a class, looking up government services, or participating in the digital economy.

However, this initial research also notes a deep inequality that exists along the lines of gender and in the intersections of gender along with geography, income, education, and age. In the context of this inequality, more than just infrastructure will be important to closing the digital gender gap. However, it is clear that digital gender equality requires closing the meaningful connectivity gender gap.

Understanding Meaningful Connectivity

In addition to her full-time job as an invoicing agent with a community WiFi service provider, Heny sells mangoes. Fortunately for her, she's able to use the public WiFi network at her work to post pictures and announce the latest shipments of new produce to would-be customers. [...] Through her access to a reliable, high-capacity WiFi connection at work, Heny is able to post regularly and with higher quality photos that give her a competitive edge in selling mangoes within her community. She can make more sales and market more mangoes than others. Compared to another vendor in the same community, Rinie, who relies only on her mobile internet connection to sell mangos through e-marketing, Heny is able to sell three times as much in a day than what Rinie can in a week. In turn, Heny has built a reputation with several farmers for her reliability in getting a good price for herself and for farmers, too (Woodhouse and Chair 2020).

Our first article for FemLab compared the (pre-pandemic) experiences of Heny and Rinie as mango vendors in their town in Indonesia (Ibid.). Both sold mangoes online, but Heny was able to upload better photos and therefore sold more than Rinie by privilege of her ability to access the public WiFi

network at her place of work (Bidwell 2019). This was one of the pillars of meaningful connectivity (MC) at work.

We define meaningful connectivity as someone's access to the internet with 4G-like speeds, ownership of a smartphone, and daily access to the internet from an unlimited connection point, such as home, work, or a place of study (A4AI 2020). Through this connectivity, women entrepreneurs, like Heny, can achieve more than with just basic access.

However, meaningful connectivity lags far behind internet use—and both suffer from a deep inequality by gender. By official measures, the pandemic has accelerated internet access to new heights, with an estimated 4.9 billion using the internet (ITU 2021). At the same time, women's internet use still trails men's, with inequalities growing to roughly three men for every two women online across Africa (ITU 2021). In our initial measurements in nine countries, these numbers are more stark, where, even in the context of near gender parity in internet use, disparity emerges at the level of meaningful connectivity (Web Foundation 2020; A4AI 2022b). This framework not only aims to challenge what is “good enough” in terms of internet access, but similarly exposes deeper inequalities that have tangible impacts on women's lives.

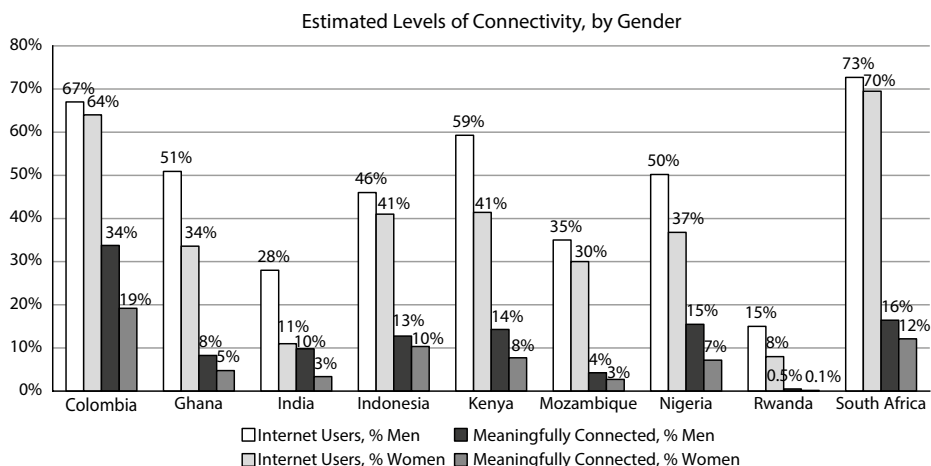
For this reason, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI)—a multi-stakeholder coalition of governments, private companies, and civil society organizations around the world working to lower the cost of broadband globally—proposes that policymakers and researchers alike adopt what it refers to as meaningful connectivity. The meaningful connectivity framework enables interested stakeholders to assess whether the quality of the internet connectivity truly empowers people to access the full potential of the internet. This goes beyond the simple binary of online/offline that hides inequalities of online experiences. With this knowledge, policymakers can respond to the digital gender gap as it exists and develop finer solutions that more precisely address connectivity deficits.

Measuring Meaningful Connectivity

The most commonly used indicator for internet use today is the share of the population that has used the internet in the last three months (ITU 2021). A4AI's analysis shows the use of this indicator in isolation can be misleading (A4AI 2020).

In 2021, A4AI collected survey data capturing levels of meaningful connectivity for nine low- and middle-income countries (A4AI 2022b). On average

Graph 8.1 Internet v MC

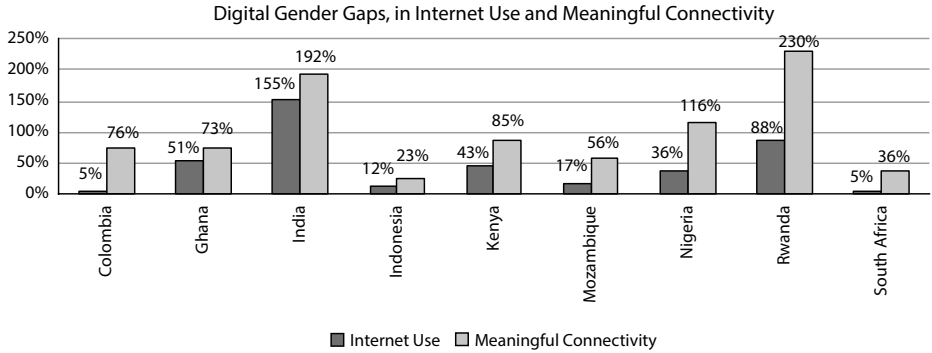


in these countries, forty-three per cent of the population was connected to the internet, but only ten per cent of the total population was meaningfully connected. In other words, fewer than one in four internet users had a meaningful connection. Two of the countries included in the analysis were Ghana and Rwanda. In Ghana, forty-two per cent of the population uses the internet, but only seven per cent are meaningfully connected. Similarly, in Rwanda, twenty-two per cent of the population is connected, but only one per cent has access to a meaningful connection. This means that fewer than five per cent of internet users in Rwanda are meaningfully connected.

Besides being misleading at the national level, measuring internet use by gender based on the relative share of male and female internet users can also be problematic (Web Foundation 2020). In certain instances, countries have managed to nearly rid themselves of the digital gender gap altogether when it is measured based on internet use. Yet, in these same countries, a large gender gap persists when the gap is measured based on meaningful connectivity. In all nine countries in our data, the gender gaps in terms of meaningful connectivity were larger than for connectivity overall. This is because among internet users, men are far more likely to have a meaningful connection.

These results highlight the power and benefit of the meaningful connectivity framework in identifying digital gender gaps where no gaps were previously thought to exist, and more accurately, assessing the size of the gaps that were already identified. In particular, the analysis carried out by A4AI to measure meaningful connectivity indicates that women in low- and middle-income countries not only faced limitations to connect, but once connected, were more

Graph 8.2 Gender Gaps



likely to only have basic access. As such, they remained unable to experience the full potential of the internet and were less likely to create content, take a class, look for a job, or sell and buy goods online (A4AI 2022b).

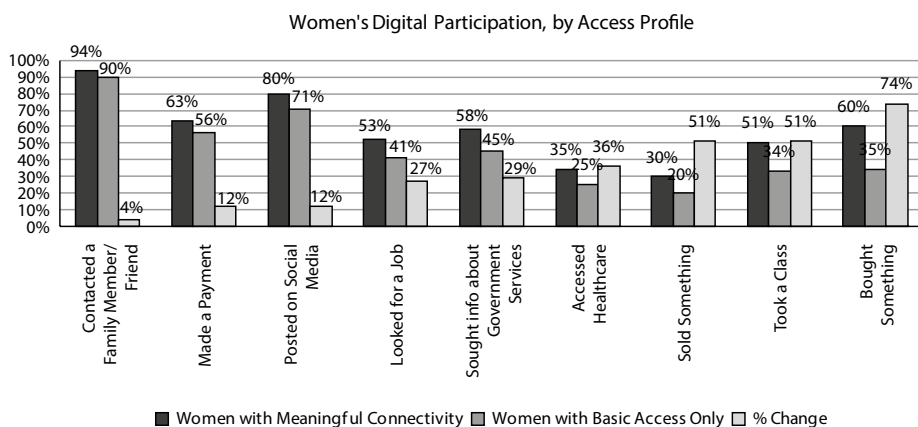
In Colombia, there is a digital gender gap of five per cent in internet use.¹ This means that to reach gender parity, only five per cent more women would need to connect. This is encouraging, but if policymakers would base their decisions on this figure alone, they may conclude that designing digital gender-responsive policies is no longer necessary. However, looking at the gender gap in meaningful connectivity demonstrates that tackling gender-specific barriers should remain a high priority for policymakers in internet and communication technologies (ICTs). To reach gender parity in meaningful connectivity, the share of women with meaningful connectivity would need to increase by seventy-six per cent (A4AI 2022b). The A4AI 2022 report demonstrates that despite the appearance of digital gender parity, gender-specific internet barriers continue to keep women from catching up to their male counterparts in terms of the quality of their connectivity.

The data from the surveys A4AI conducted in the nine countries in 2021 included indicators that allowed us to calculate rates of meaningful connectivity within the total population as well as by gender. The surveys were also designed to help A4AI understand how the empowering effect of the internet differs for women with meaningful connectivity as compared to those that only have a marginal connection. To do this, as part of the survey, we collected data that measured the level of confidence women had in themselves to find information, and successfully use the internet to carry out different activities.²

1 <https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/>

2 Details on the survey questions and methodology are explored in A4AI (2022b).

Graph 8.3 Actions by Connectivity Profile



We found that while internet access of any kind supports high levels of informational literacy, women that were meaningfully connected were more likely to participate in the digital economy. Meaningfully connected women were a third more likely to perform activities online, such as buy or sell goods online or take an online course. In contrast, women with meaningful connectivity were only eleven per cent more likely to use the internet to find information online compared to women that had only basic access.

Women in our survey used meaningful connectivity to increase their participation in the digital economy and undertake personal development activities, things that their less well-connected counterparts did in fewer numbers.

In particular, some of the largest advances were made in online economic activity by women with meaningful connectivity. Across the nine countries in our study, the largest jumps between women with basic access and those with meaningful connectivity were in the numbers who had bought or sold something online in the past three months. However, we also know from other surveys that education plays an influential role in addition to the kind of internet access a woman has in determining her use of the internet (A4AI 2022a).

Exploring Meaningful Access: Beyond Infrastructure

It is not enough to merely have access to an internet-enabled device; one must be able to access it meaningfully in a context-appropriate manner. Some contextual factors that influence such meaningful connectivity are discussed here:

The real reason we can't get [the] last several hundreds of millions of women online—it comes down to [the] fact there are people in their community who don't want them online (Sterling in Edwards 2017).

Socio-cultural norms are among the most significant, yet largely ignored determinants influencing meaningful internet connectivity.

Many villages in India have, at various points in time, banned women and girls from using mobile phones (Kovacs 2017), with the threat of fines for those caught in the act, sometimes leading to violence. In India, a young girl was burned alive by four men after she refused to stop talking on her mobile phone (Iaccino 2014), and in Pakistan, a social media celebrity was killed by her brother for posting controversial pictures of herself online.³

In cultures where women remain largely restricted to the domestic sphere, the internet can potentially be a liberating gateway to access communities and forbidden experiences outside the home, such as communication with men or pornographic content. But this same liberatory potential also threatens to destabilize the cultural hierarchies that exist within the home, resulting in stricter control over women's access to the internet to prevent such subversion.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, such domestic surveillance and control over women's access to the internet resulted in women being unable to report domestic violence for the fear of being caught in families that use a shared phone. As noted by Bishakha Datta, Executive Director of Point of View, in a research study on gendered surveillance during COVID-19:

Everyone is in a small house, everyone is really hearing each other. So how would you complain? [...] Women are also feeling a little nervous about [using] helpline numbers because the minute you use that number, it's recorded on your phone. So if that is not your own phone, then it gets recorded on a shared phone. [...] People are scared of leaving a trace of the number that they are calling (Radhakrishnan 2020, 9).

A lack of spatial privacy to access the internet at home has also resulted in instances of trans-queer individuals being accidentally "outed" when their online interactions were caught by family members (Suchitra 2020).

These socio-cultural restrictions are not unique to the home. Popular initiatives such as public WiFi can fail to meaningfully connect women to the internet due to constraints women face in public spaces, such as restrictions on their mobility and public surveillance through the male gaze. Free WiFi

3 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36814258>

hotspots in public spaces such as offices and open grounds therefore become inaccessible to women, as explained by a research participant in a study on public WiFi initiatives in India (Mudliar 2018):

It is considered disreputable for women to be seen around these places and I will have to deal with a lot of people talking and asking me about my presence there. Who wants to deal with that?

Highlighting the issue of safety for women in accessing public WiFi hotspots, another research participant in Mudliar's study notes:

When the kendra was first opened, it offered free Internet service to the village. I went there once to try it out and a man there was very rude to me. He passed snide remarks saying, 'look they have all come here for [the] Internet only because it does not cost them.' He also did not allow us to interact with the machine freely. You can only learn if you fiddle around with stuff, but he was constantly watching over us. I never went back.

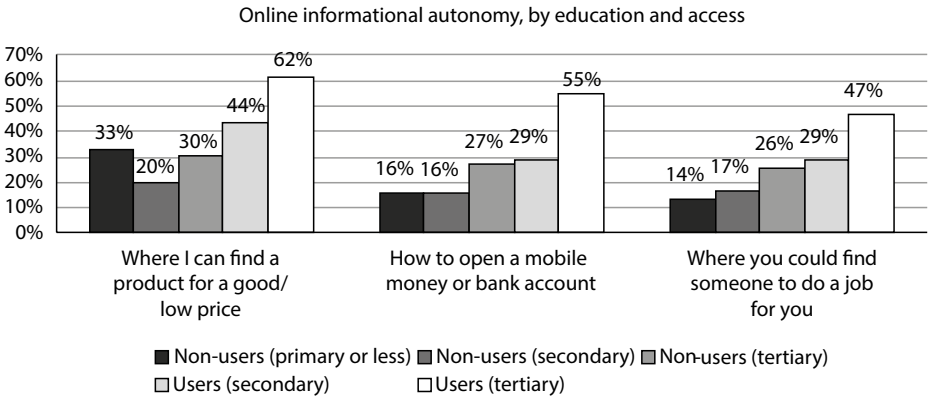
Thus, women reported only having heard about the public WiFi in the village in contrast to men who actually used the service, rendering such internet access not meaningful.

In other internet access initiatives such as community networks that are gaining popularity in many parts of the world, women are sometimes relegated to acting as "proxies" for their male family members to exercise authority in decision-making about the network. Highlighting the importance of agency, Nic Bidwell, Gender and Social Impact Facilitator for the Association for Progressive Communications Local Access Project, noted during a panel discussion at the BPF Gender session at the Internet Governance Forum, 2018 (IGF 2018, 13),

Community Networks in which there was the most gender inequality [were] also the ones where, for political reasons, a woman had been put at the front of it, and I think that that suggests to us that this cannot be a kind of superficial [access] [...] just put somebody in charge and hope that it'll work.

In all of the above examples, predominant socio-cultural norms have a profoundly limiting impact on meaningful internet access for women and girls. Initiatives focused on providing meaningful connectivity must therefore also work towards ensuring that women and girls have the socio-cultural freedom to avail internet access.

Graph 8.4 CoE West Africa Info.



Beyond socio-cultural norms lies the important issue of affordability of internet access. Affordability relates to the cost of devices and data, and the availability of disposable income and financial resources to spend on getting connected to the internet. A4AI notes that the digital divide is a poverty and gender divide, and that women are among those hardest hit by the high cost to connect. Among internet users in rural areas, Web Foundation found that women were fourteen per cent more likely than men to say the cost limited how much they could use the internet (Web Foundation 2020).

Affordability, along with pervasive socio-cultural norms, have far-reaching implications for digital skills. For instance, poorer families often prefer to invest their limited resources in educating their male children due to patriarchal attitudes which view girls' education as a burden instead of an investment (van der Vleuten 2016). Even when girls receive education, STEM fields are largely perceived to be male domains (Hammond et al. 2020). This impacts the opportunities that are available to girls in technology fields and consequently, their digital literacy. Growing up, such a lack of digital literacy also extends to women lacking the confidence and know-how to participate meaningfully online (A4AI 2022a).

Affordability and digital skills also play a crucial role in being able to protect oneself from online risks and harms, such as online violence, misinformation, and financial fraud, which is critical to ensuring a meaningful and sustainable online presence (A4AI 2022b). Internet access increased informational confidence on a variety of economic indicators for Nigerian women as part of our research into the costs of digital exclusion: meaningful connectivity, it seems, pairs with even greater confidence to take action and participate based on that information.

To be able to verify information one reads online, one must have the educational background, digital skills, and affordability of enough data to browse through other sources of information online (Web Foundation 2020). These factors are also necessary to report instances of online violence.

Consider the case of internet banking for social protection schemes, which became a prominent means of accessing money during COVID-19 lockdowns. In some historically marginalized caste and tribal communities in India, control of digital finances usually lies with a literate dominant-caste landlord (Sur 2020). Similarly, for women with disabilities, there is high dependence upon able-bodied family members to access social protection money that is transferred directly to the bank accounts of the women through mobile banking.⁴ Without the autonomy to access and verify their own digital finances, marginalized communities are at risk of financial fraud.

Thus, to empower individuals and communities to make the most meaningful use of internet access, it is crucial that efforts to enhance connectivity pay close attention to contextual factors beyond internet infrastructure. As discussed here, these include socio-cultural sanction and freedom to avail internet access, including exercising one's agency over the autonomous usage of internet-enabled devices without surveillance; affordability of internet access; and relevant capacities and digital literacy skills to make the desired use of internet access, among other contextual factors.

Reaching for Universal Meaningful Connectivity

Several barriers stand in the way of gender-equitable internet access across the globe. From a top-down perspective, the traditional forms of measurement now show their age as new indicators, such as the meaningful connectivity framework, and demonstrate deeper inequalities where a more shallow assessment would find none.

The meaningful connectivity framework proposes a revised policy agenda with additional targets around connection speed, device functionality, data allowances, and frequency of use. It also correlates with greater outcomes such as accessing healthcare, taking a class online, or participating in the digital economy. This correlation holds strong across the lines of gender, but the access to such connectivity is not as equally distributed.

4 See "Neglected and Forgotten: Women with Disabilities during the COVID 19 Crisis in India." <http://www.risingflame.org>

Policy agendas must reform, and this reform cannot just be in infrastructure. In addition to the devices they carry and the quality of their connection, women face social and economic barriers that discourage their use of the internet. Policymakers, when they look to change their broadband policies, with universal, meaningful connectivity in mind, must keep these issues in consideration for a holistic response.

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9. Not Quite the Death of Distance in Chennai: Challenging the Resettlement Utopia of Perumbakkam

Sunitha Don Bosco & Maartje van Eerd

Abstract

Poor communities facing marginalization can benefit the most from the opportunities digital communication technologies provide. However, the digital divide clouds the realization of these opportunities, especially for women. This chapter sheds light on the issue of resettlement in Chennai city in the context of housing rights of urban poor women with a focus on the role of Mobile Technology for Development (MT4D) in mitigating the negative impact of the entire process of resettlement. Our MT4D experiments in the field with affected women also present the dynamics of the interactions between gender, technology, and poverty in the urban resettlement context. The researchers opine that adoption of a techno-optimism approach using MT4D will not only effectively solve many issues which arise due to lack of information in resettlement sites, but can also serve as a tool to help women in resettlement sites to migrate into digital economies.

Keywords: digital divide, resettlement, housing rights, access to information, MT4D (Mobile Technology for Development)

Introduction

Techno-optimism, with specific reference to Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D), dominates scholarly discourses and development policies globally (Larsson and Stark 2019). Alternatively, critics, mostly scholars from the social sciences, have also presented

pessimistic views on the failures of this techno-optimistic or techno-centric approach in delivering the perceived positive impact due to an array of reasons (Tayoma 2011). Disparities exist, for example, in terms of access to mobile technology with determinants like availability, affordability, awareness, ability, agency, and social norms which contribute to the digital divide (Hernandez and Roberts 2018). The urban poor are often left out of this techno utopia as technologies in the profit-driven market are not designed considering the needs of the poor. The urban poor suffer from “persistent digital and financial exclusion” that prevents them from being integrated into the economic progression of the cities (Kesavan 2015).

The city of Chennai has been witnessing large-scale development-induced resettlement, wherein the poor are evicted from inner city slums and resettled in apartments in large colonies at the outskirts of the city. Resettlement experts have critiqued these very large resettlement projects as problematic as the poor face multiple losses and the most impacted are women. Women in resettlement become even more impoverished as resettlement results in amplified financial, social, and geographical exclusion (Bajpai and Gautam 2018; Coelho, Chandrika and Venkat 2013; Sikka and Mathur 2018; Smyth, Steyn, Esteves et al. 2015; Terminski 2015; Quetulio-Navarra, Znidarsic and Niehof, 2017).

Our chapter sheds light on the issue of resettlement in Chennai city in the context of housing rights of urban poor women with a focus on the role of MT4D in mitigating the impact of the entire process of resettlement and informing those affected about their rights. Two projects were conducted on an experimental basis: a capacity-building programme on smartphones and social media usage, and the development and testing of a mobile application. The main objectives of these experimental studies was to train women in Perumbakkam (Chennai, India) to use mobile technology and social media, to test the reach of customized mobile applications for the specific needs of women in Perumbakkam, and also to understand the factors which play a role in women in resettlement sites adopting or rejecting mobile technology. Our MT4D experiments in the field with affected women present the dynamics of the interactions between gender, technology, and poverty in the urban resettlement context. A participatory documentary film project we embarked upon, *We too Urban*, gave us access to stories the community wanted to tell the world. Interviews with the affected women in informal settlements prone to evictions and those in the Perumbakkam resettlement site focus on the gender dimensions of resettlement.¹

1 All names used in this chapter have been changed or withheld to protect identity.



Figure 9.1 Aerial view of Perumbakkam

Ground Realities of Displacement and Resettlement

The visit to the Perumbakkam resettlement site² in December 2017 was an eye-opener to the problems of the resettled urban poor, especially women. This was part of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies³ (IHS) International Refresher Course on gender dimensions of urban river restoration projects. We went to the Perumbakkam resettlement site during a field visit and as soon as we got out of our vehicle, women in the tenements surrounded us and started sharing their stories. The statements below were made by women who were moved to Perumbakkam from a slum in the city.

I have a house now, nice and shining new, but what am I supposed to do in it [...]? Sit inside and admire the house all day? I cannot eat the house, can I? I have a stomach to fill [...]. I cannot find a job here, I cannot move back to the city [...]. We were happy we were getting homes but we were not prepared for this reality [...] (Personal interview).

I used to work as a maid in residences in the city, I lost my job because I moved here [...], as a single parent with a girl child ready to join college [...]. I am unable to support her education. Going back to the city for work

2 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/problems-galore-for-perumbakkam-tnscb-residents/article31526506.ece>

3 <https://www.ihs.nl/en>



Figure 9.2 Women in Perumbakkam

is impossible with erratic bus services [...]. I am struggling to make ends meet, I don't know how I will educate my child [...], resettlement is a bane for me [...]. I was not aware about the consequences of moving out of the city [...] (Personal interview).

These stories went against the dominant discourses and public understanding that resettlement projects are a viable solution to urban housing needs. Finding a home in the city is a distant dream for the many poor who migrate to urban areas in search of livelihoods. Many of the poor end up in slums along rivers or in other vacant spots that they can find. Official estimates indicate that the slum population in Chennai doubled from 0.7 million in the 1970s to 1.3 million in 2011 (Saharan et al. 2018, 458).

Resettlement in Chennai

Chennai is currently facing mass eviction and resettlement. A river restoration project will eventually lead to displacement and resettlement. Sixty thousand families or roughly 200,000 people living in slums along the riverbanks in so-called objectionable areas—low-lying flood-prone areas of the city—were earmarked for eviction, many of whom have already been relocated (Whitcomb 2020).

The Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB)⁴ is responsible for the implementation of housing projects for the urban poor, and they are the implementing agency with regard to resettlement of the urban poor. The current resettlement sites are often located twenty-five to thirty kilometres from the city centre, with weak or no access to public transport, employment, education, or healthcare (Diwakar and Peter 2016; van Eerd 2018).

Widely known in the resettlement literature are the impoverishment risks listed by Cernea (2000, 1569) which are “landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity and mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property and resources and community disarticulation.” These are identified as the key risks, and people are vulnerable to impoverishment in a forced development-induced displacement and resettlement. Resettlement research has also overwhelmingly shown the negative impact of the change of location on livelihoods, particularly of women, who are often worse affected (Terminski 2015; Sikka and Mathur 2018).

The Perumbakkam Resettlement Site

Perumbakkam is a very large resettlement site in Chennai with a population of 14,000 families, or around 60,000 people, but it will, when finalized, rehouse a total of 100,000 people. It is located more than thirty kilometres away from the Chennai city centre, which is situated outside the Greater Chennai Corporation limit. The project came under heavy criticism⁵ for its failure to involve the impacted communities, especially women, in the design, development, and implementation (IRCDUC 2015). The lack of comprehensive mechanisms for resettlement compromises the rights of displaced communities in Tamil Nadu and in this specific resettlement project (Peter 2017). Research⁶ has shown that those resettled there face a multitude of problems such as the lack of economic opportunities in the vicinity of Perumbakkam, and that those continuing with their previous jobs must travel long distances, which is problematic, particularly for women (Diwaker and Peter 2016; HLRN and IRCDUC 2017).

We embarked on the documentary film project, *We too Urban*, to digitally record the stories of resettled poor communities in Perumbakkam,

4 Since 2021, officially renamed as the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB)

5 <https://www.cag.org.in/blogs/tn-slum-clearance-board-through-lens-cags-audit-report-part-ii>

6 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345320945_Housing_aspiration_of_resettled_communities_through_a_gender_lens

particularly from a gender perspective. The documentary, with participation of women from Perumbakkam, will be used as teaching material for students in universities, and to inform various stakeholders across the globe. These include those who are involved in resettlement, but also to inform the public about the gender dimension of resettlement so that the same mistakes are not repeated. The project gave us access to stories the community wanted to tell the world. During filming, we met Girija, who narrated her story, a strong testimonial which tells us of the impact of physical distance on urban poor women caused by resettlement.

My husband has been sick, and bed-ridden for twelve years now. We were moved from Otteri [Chennai city] to Perumbakkam. When I was in Otteri, I was able to take care of him [*pointing at her husband who lies in the cot*] despite going to work, as my son and neighbours offered support in taking care of my husband. Here in Perumbakkam, I have no one to help, everyone is new here, I cannot go to work or take care of my husband. [...] I can't even leave him alone to go search for jobs. [...] I did apply for his pension, but haven't received it yet, whenever I go to the office with the request for pension, they are asking me to bring him [the husband] to the office to prove his disability. If I had to take him it would cost me Rs. 500 (approx. \$6.58). For that Rs. 500 I have to beg. I have no money. Even to get medicine from the hospital they ask me to bring him in person. Back in the city, the hospital was nearby, I could go. Here, to travel three km I have to spend Rs. 200 (approximately \$2.63) both ways. Where will I go for that money? (Personal interview).

Slums have been part and parcel of the landscape in Chennai. Many slums have been there for generations and some even have purchased "their" land from local politicians in the false understanding they would be safe (source: interview in Radha Krishna Nagar, December 2017). As this land is owned by the Public Works Department (PWD), it was not supposed to have been sold. Although the overall living conditions of these slums are problematic as they lack many services and living is tough, the biggest advantage of these inner-city slums for their communities is the location; they are located close to the workplaces, hospitals, and schools. This locational benefit is particularly important for women who are therefore able to combine a domestic job with their own household responsibilities.

We were born and brought up here and we haven't caused any problems, people just mind their business. We pleaded with them not to demolish



Figure 9.3 A woman and her child watching the demolition of their home in an inner city slum

the houses. We requested for resettlement in the city. No one heard us. We have petitioned many government officials in this regard. There are no job opportunities there (Perumbakkam). Our kids are studying here. Our source of livelihood is here. There are no job opportunities there (Personal interview).

I work as a cook in nearby homes, I earn around Rs. 10,000 per month (approx. \$131). I never went hungry here, what will I do there in Perumbakkam? Will I get a job there? You are going to set up a park here, you call this beautification of the city? Removing the poor is not beautification, can your development be inclusive of the poor? They have been talking about evictions for some years, I never realised it is for real [...]. We were promised by our local leaders that evictions won't happen and now I am amidst the rubble [...] (Personal interview).

Our interviews make clear that people living in the inner-city slums in Chennai targeted for resettlement are either uninformed or not sufficiently informed about the resettlement plans and processes. The information on what is happening, when people will be moved, and where, is very fragmented. Although in some cases, a selected group is informed; in general, there is a lot of uncertainty and anxiety amongst the community. Sometimes plans had been announced a long time ago but since nothing happened, people forgot about them. In other cases, people were only informed a few hours prior to a forced eviction, while in other cases, these forced evictions start totally unannounced.

Resettlement from a Housing Rights Perspective

From a housing rights perspective, governments are obligated to demonstrate that the measures they take are sufficient to realize the right to adequate housing for every individual in the shortest time possible, in accordance with maximum available resources. Adequacy includes security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. The right to housing implies that the state has a duty to facilitate access to housing for all (CESCR 1991; 1997). To that extent, human rights make housing a right and a public good.

Therefore, governments clearly should not evict people from their homes and lands without any due process. The protection against forced evictions is guaranteed in several international frameworks. The Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement which were formally acknowledged by the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2007 define the practice of forced evictions and lay down stringent criteria, outlining when they are allowed to occur, under which circumstances, and how the impact should be monitored. They establish the “right to be resettled,” and they also call upon states to guarantee the right to adequate housing for displaced communities living in adverse conditions (United Nations 2007). Meaning that resettlement sites must fulfil the criteria for adequate housing.

To what extent those criteria are met is highly questionable, as lots of research, including ours, continues to show (amongst others Beier, Spire and Bridonneau 2022; Price and Singer 2019; Satiroglu and Choi 2015; Zaman, Nair and Guoqing 2021). Compromised factors in resettlement varied from safety and security, loss of social assets, social stigma, children’s education, unemployment, crime, alcohol, and drug addiction and child abuse. But one main component to many of the factors which causes distress is the lack of information and communication between various stakeholders. The perversity of this resettlement is that Perumbakkam is situated just a stone’s throw away from the information technology (IT) corridor of Chennai.

Death of Distance

Advances in digital media and mobile telecommunications have revolutionized the world and re-popularized the notion of the “global village,” a proposition by the media philosopher McLuhan (1967) who argued that the

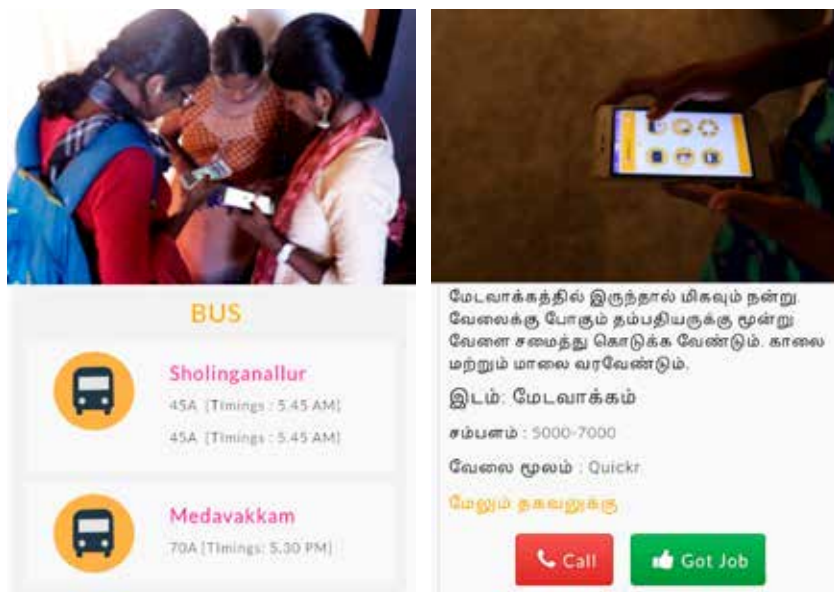
ubiquity of communicative technologies would vanish the issues of time and space. Cairncross, an economist and journalist, promoted this notion, making the case that technology has created a “death of distance” (1997; 2001) diminishing physical spatial distances. On the contrary, in spite of the recent rise in digital connectivity in India⁷ through cheap data plans and mobile phones, the divides of space continue to exclude the urban poor. Death of distance is not real for women in resettlement; it determines their access to healthcare, employment, and social networks. The reality of the distance, living in the outskirts of the city, is life-changing for many resettled women. The techno utopia visions of smart cities are yet to reach urban poor women in resettlement sites, who face geographical, economic, social, as well as digital exclusion.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality advocates the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to promote the empowerment of women.⁸ The OECD report (2018) acknowledges that digital technology adoption, i.e., internet, digital platforms, mobile phones, and digital financial services can provide increased employment opportunities and access to information and knowledge, which can result in economic empowerment of women, resulting in solutions for existing gender disparities. Though communities in poverty facing marginalization and vulnerabilities can benefit the most from the connectivity and opportunities digital technology provides, however, the digital divide clouds the realization of these opportunities, especially for women. Research from around the globe has proved that urban poor women are less likely to be digitally active. Barriers that prevent women from fully benefiting from the use of mobile technology and internet range from issues in access to technology, deficient technical skills, curtailment of autonomy, inadequate infrastructure, and high costs of connectivity.⁹ Today, some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the mobile internet worldwide (OECD 2018). Women in India are fifteen per cent less likely to own a mobile phone and thirty-three per cent less likely to use mobile internet services than men, and thirty-six per cent of Indian

7 https://techcrunch.com/2020/06/19/how-reliance-jio-platforms-became-indias-biggest-telecom-network/?gucounter=1&guce_referrer=aHRocHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAFBpcI5yGQIMi7veyg1gNs6EFoGIp32YZBa8hj5STsBTCFNhcV7n9kxLC4qL8NyUHWzV7dCQv2vpi2XvWt7wQJZjcWITmRgK2h_RYR3xBYudk9Q5kLu6WEkfgxo-FPjVW3TaVkjqsI8WO6q-J5zUH_v5_8H_9DDooYxEsAcqb2h

8 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>

9 <https://www.w4.org/en/icts-and-mobile-technologies-empowering-women/>



Figures 9.4 & 9.5 Mobile application study in Perumbakkam

males have mobile internet access compared to only sixteen per cent of females (Cornelissen 2021).

There are hardly any studies on the role of ICT4D projects in an urban poor resettlement context. As governments across the developing world push forward the agenda of development of smart cities, it is imperative that we study and understand the barriers in the creation of an enabling development environment for digital inclusion of urban poor communities.

Can MT4D in an urban resettlement context help in mitigating the issues women face? Can technological interventions also inform them about their rights and entitlements and connect them with support agencies and non-governmental organizations? Will “death of distance” be a reality as these women become more digitally literate? Our experiments in the field provided us an insight into the much-needed information and knowledge on the interactions of urban poor women in the digital space.

Some statements from women who participated in our field experiments were as follows:

The workshop was an unforgettable event, as it was a good opportunity to spend time with my friends after a long time and also learning something new. Every session is in my memory, and I can outline what I learnt from each session. From this workshop, I have learnt to record videos, use

selfie stick and take photographs using my mobile. I have also learnt the benefits of social media usage. I still have the photographs of the workshop; I retrieve these photographs and relive those golden memories of the two-day workshop even today (Personal interview).

Post workshop, I am active on social media. I hold accounts on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. I am a secretary to the block association, and I use social media to connect with the residents. I have taught other women to open and use Facebook accounts. I have also taught them about privacy setting in their social media account to safeguard their personal information (Personal interview).

My husband did not allow me to open a social media account. After attending the workshop, I have explained to him the pros and cons of using social media and then he permitted me. Even now, I need to get prior permission from my husband for posting family pictures in my social media account (Personal interview).

Smartphone technology has helped me to apply online for obtaining government certificates like community, income, etc. This technology helped me for safety reasons as a woman to reach helpline numbers for immediate action (Personal interview).

Though women acknowledged the enabling power of mobile technology in improving their capacities under the informational, associative, and communicative framework (Gurumurthy and Chami 2014), women are yet to realize that access to communication technology, in this case, mobile phones, falls under the rights framework, the right of women to communicate, express, and raise their voices to find solidarity. The digital divide is evident from our interactions with the women in the resettlement site. Digital exclusion of women is facilitated by factors like ownership, affordability, technological illiteracy, and gendered social norms. Women in resettlement sites are yet to capitalize on the mobile technology revolution.

Though technology alone cannot result in development, it is the skills and capacities of an individual which is necessitated for the effective use of technology for development. "The greater one's skills and capacities, the more value technology has" (Toyama 2011, 3–4). Our interactions and experiments with women in the resettlement site at Perumbakkam provide an insight for the need to accelerate digital literacy among resettled women.

Conclusion

The resettlement of urban poor from an inner city slum to Perumbakkam situated on the IT corridor of Chennai involves the shift from an informal economic hub to a formalized digital economy hub. The community in an inner city informal settlement relied on traditional modes of communication with word-of-mouth as the primary form of communication, complemented by well-knit social networks, and access to resources. On the contrary, in the technopolises of Chennai, where the resettlement sites are situated, the mode of communication primarily is on digital platforms. All transactions, including social networking, employment opportunities, and healthcare have transitioned to digital platforms in the technopolis region of Chennai. With digital illiteracy high among urban poor women in resettlement, it is almost impossible for them to transition and adapt to the newer digitally rich economic region. The theory of information poverty by Chatman (1996) puts forth the concept of digital poverty, where marginalized social groups suffer from an inability to satisfy information needs, that being the case in Perumbakkam and other resettlement sites in Chennai.

Digital poverty can be combated with capacity-building programmes on digital literacy. It can help women to migrate to the digital world and reap the benefits of techno utopia. As visions for smart cities are being implemented, there is an urgent need to rethink and reframe urban housing policies to incorporate an informed, participatory, and inclusive framework for resettlement projects to effectively mitigate the impact on the urban poor. Adoption of a techno-optimism approach using MT4D will not only effectively solve many issues which arise due to lack of information, but can also serve as a tool to help women in resettlement sites to migrate into the newer digital economy of the region. Leave no one behind (LNOB), the transformative promise of the UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda, implicates the importance of inclusive development visions (UN-SDG 2022; United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2022).

Will digital inclusiveness help in solving some of the problems women face in resettlement? Will women be able to access and appreciate the transformative power of technology, and use it as a tool to further build their networks, and raise their voices to assert their rights through digital platforms? Our project with women from Perumbakkam will continue to ask these questions, and together, we will search for possible answers.

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10. Superbrands—Too Big to be Fair?

René König & Paula Wittenburg

Abstract

Superbrands, established global companies, are popular but their business practices are often controversial. Recent crises, from COVID-19 to the war in Ukraine, have reignited a key question: How can such global corporations maintain complex supply chains in more ethical and sustainable ways? We discuss these recent developments and ask if superbrands may simply be “too big to be fair” and whether smaller and locally oriented companies could provide a better alternative. Consulting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) experts and reports, we conclude that superbrands from industries like fast fashion face large structural changes to become more sustainable. This often leads to a gap between the vision for higher ethical standards and the actual implementation. Significant reimagination is required to make superbrands fairer and more sustainable, an endeavour we regard as inevitable to create a future of work that is just.

Keywords: superbrands, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), globalization, supply chains, fairness, marketing

Introduction

Globalized trade—once believed to be the driver of not just economies but also progressive social change—increasingly appears as a phenomenon that demands reconsideration. Climate change, COVID-19, and the Russo-Ukrainian war have laid open its practical weaknesses and ethical dilemmas. Superbrands, i.e., large corporations with a particularly strong relation to their customer base (Kralingen 1999), are of particular concern: their supply chains, as well as their consumer base, rely on globalized networks. They have not only accumulated unmatched economic and political power, but have also established themselves as popular cultural icons (Went 2000). From Apple to Zara, superbrands are

shaping identities on all levels—individually, nationally, globally. Their image transcends their physical and economic significance, making them appear as creators of social identity (Bagozzi et al. 2021). Above all, it is this emotional and symbolic meaning, fuelled by clever marketing campaigns, that elevates them to their exceptional, or “super” status. This is what made Russians queue for hours to buy a mediocre meal that many of them couldn’t afford when McDonald’s opened the doors of its first branch in Moscow in 1990 (Wiener-Bronner 2022). In the same way, the symbolic implications could not be missed when many Western stores in Russia remained closed after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. These were not merely lost opportunities for trade but symbols of failed politics, broken links, and shattered futures. For decades, superbrands functioned as ambassadors of larger ideals, connected to the optimistic assumption that trade connections could also push forward democratic values and human rights. “Change through trade” was a long-established approach in Western foreign policy, but the Russian invasion made it painfully obvious how naive it was (Moens, Aarup, Leali and Lau 2022).

The recent drastic restrictions to trade—from COVID-19-related lockdowns to unprecedented sanctions against Russia—were almost unimaginable just until they actually happened. Practising the unthinkable has rapidly led to historic transformations that will have effects lasting far beyond the current crisis. Routines and taken-for-granted ways of working are being questioned, and new modes of organizing supply chains are emerging (Veselovská 2020). We are not facing a temporary crisis but possibly the dawn of a new era. Nobody can know with certainty what this new era will look like. But what we do know is that every crisis also holds opportunities for change and that decisions made today pave the path towards the future.

Superbrands are at a crossroads. Some left Russia not only because sanctions forced them to but because they feared long-lasting damage to their image being associated with the unethical actions of an unjust regime (Chin et al. 2022). Of course, the fear of image damage is not a new phenomenon—it did not appear with the current crisis, nor will it leave with it. But the current transformations give old and recurring questions a pressing relevance: are superbrands an adequate model for the twenty-first century? Can they maintain their complex supply chains in a socially and environmentally responsible way? Are smaller and local brands the more sustainable option and are superbrands simply too big to be fair with regard to their social responsibilities? Or do we need superbrands even more than ever as ambassadors that unify a divided world at least a little bit?

We discuss these questions by first taking a deeper look at the controversial images of superbrands. This makes us wonder if smaller and more local

companies might be the more promising model. Through this speculation, we argue that fairer business models—including superbrands—appear inevitable even as they are difficult to achieve.

Superbrands, Super Evil?

The idea that trade might lead to positive social change really took off in the 1990s, another era of transformation, albeit a more optimistic one. Communism was defeated and capitalism emerged as the big winner of the Cold War. At least, that is how it appeared for a little while, prompting Francis Fukuyama to announce the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1992). This hypothesis, portraying Western liberalism as the clear winner of an epic ideological battle, has of course been controversially discussed (Kagan 2008; Hodgson 2002), but some also regard the latest developments as its confirmation (Glancy 2022).

Already in the 1990s, while governments worldwide embraced neoliberal strategies, an anti-capitalist counter-movement was on the rise. For instance, in 1998, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Attac¹ was founded in resistance to the seemingly limitless power of globalized corporations. A year later, 40,000 protestors turned against a conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO), clashing with police in what has come to be known as the iconic “Battle of Seattle.” Global corporations were blamed for much of what went wrong in the world—from social injustices to environmental pollution. Naomi Klein’s (2010) book, *No Logo*, became a bestseller, criticizing the overwhelming power of superbrands and their often-exploitative practices hidden behind the shiny facades created by marketing specialists:

Since many of today’s best-known manufacturers no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and ‘brand’ them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images (Klein 2009, 5).

Looking back at the book two decades later, Dan Hancox (2019) portrays the atmosphere of that time thus:

The battle lines were clear, as ordinary citizens around the world stood in opposition to corporate greed, sweatshops, union-busting, ‘McJobs’,

1 <https://www.attac.org>

privatisation and environmental destruction: and the avatar for them all, the increasingly unavoidable logos of western 'superbrands'.

Klein wrote about an emerging movement that tried to fight corporations with their own weapons. "Adbusting," the practice of subverting adverts, built on the same powerful mechanisms as advertising to smear brands instead of promoting them. The campaigners had more than enough material at their hands. From environmental catastrophes to never-ending reports on terrible working conditions—there was no shortage of reasons to scratch the shiny facade of big brands. At the same time, their omnipresent advertising guaranteed an endless supply of material that could be weaponized.

Since then, nothing has fundamentally changed with brands and their perception. Major corporations continue to dominate the markets. Scandals keep surfacing just as predictably as the riots and protests waiting in the wings of the next WTO summit. Occasions and names may change, but the basic driving forces remain the same: greedy global corporations exploit vulnerable local populations, covered by corrupt governments. While a few "conscious consumers" may resist, the vast uncritical majority keeps the machinery running. In fact, the situation may have gotten worse due to the new superbrands of the digital economy as Dan Hancox (2019) remarks in his article reflecting on Klein's book:

Proud of yourself for not buying books or gifts from Amazon? Fair enough, but it is also the largest cloud service provider, with a 32% market share; your favourite activist website is probably using Amazon Web Services.

The internet era started with the promise of endless possibilities. Yet, a smartphone user in the 2020s can merely choose whether to feed Apple's or Google's data-hungry systems. Klein's book seems as relevant today as it was during the Battle of Seattle. Superbrands are to blame. Who could argue with that?

Although they have contrary intentions, advertisers and adbusters have one motivation in common: they each paint a very one-sided picture of the story. The problem is that this approach rarely leads to a nuanced understanding. What's worse is that consumers are driven to a state of learned helplessness, a weird mixture of wilful naiveté of giving into the constant bombardment of glossy advertising, paired with occasional outbursts of inconsequential rage when we stumble over another scandal. All this obscures the fact that we don't live in a black and white world and there is much that can be done to improve it—and is in fact done on a daily basis, including by superbrands.

To get a better picture of these activities, we spoke to Linnea Holter Thompson. Her article, co-authored with Payal Arora (Arora and Thompson 2019), had served as an early inspiration for the FemLab project. She worked as a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) specialist for the Norwegian fashion retailer, Varner, before she became a sustainability consultant. When asked about the image of superbrands, she paints a picture that complicates the narrative of critics such as Naomi Klein:

A lot of people have this perspective that the big corporations are the bad ones. But really, the more research you do on this, the more you will realise that this perception is often not true. The reason is simple: these big companies actually have the resources to put their words into action and work more systematically with responsible supply chain management (Personal interview).

Maybe more money doesn't necessarily translate to more exploitation. Yet, we intuitively take the side of the underdog. It's deeply rooted in our culture. From *David and Goliath* to *Slumdog Millionaire*—we love and cherish the narrative of the disenfranchised who beat the odds. But as attractive as these stories are, they might not be the best guides for conscious consumption. Marketing specialists already take notice of consumer preferences for the underdog and many try to portray their company as one—regardless of whether this portrayal is based in fact (Parmar 2016).

At the very least, small businesses usually stay under the radar while superbrands are always in the spotlight, making them giant targets that are hard to miss. Adbusting is one example for how this prominence can backfire, but brand communication is generally a balancing act with many pitfalls, especially when it comes to corporate responsibility, as Linnea Holter Thompson explains:

I understand now how difficult it is to balance the communication of your CSR efforts. Social impact can be hard to quantify, so when big, well-known brands, for example H&M, make public claims, they are an easy target for quite intense criticism, when in fact they are quite innovative and have routines that other fashion companies should learn from (Personal interview).

Indeed, a closer look at the case of H&M reveals that the company's communication has resulted in greenwashing accusations, but it also scored highly on the Fashion Transparency Index (Kaner 2021), an incentive

mechanism by the NGO Fashion Revolution² aimed at pushing large fashion brands towards more transparency. While it may be disputed how “good” or “bad” H&M and similar fast fashion companies actually are, it is clear that image and reality don’t necessarily match. There is not much room for nuance in our polarized world and its fast-paced media landscape. What shapes our thinking are the big headlines, scandals, and crazy stories. Like the one from 2014, when Primark shoppers found labels in their clothes with sentences such as “Forced to work exhausting hours” or “Degrading sweatshop conditions” (Rustin 2014). While it is still unclear if these labels were even authored by actual workers, the story is too remarkable to forget. What remains untold are the many more stories in which workers found better channels to express their grievances due to CSR programmes and other activities to help workers. When asked about common misconceptions that she would like to change, Thompson answers:

I think it is a misconception that small brands are responsible, and that big fashion brands purchase clothes from sweatshops. A small brand and big brand can have products with the same journey from raw material to finished product. We need to encourage companies and brands, regardless of their size, to openly report on issues and negative impacts, and to be specific when they report on their efforts (Personal interview).

The power of marketing images is a double-edged sword. Not only can it be turned against superbrands, but it also obscures a nuanced discussion of their practices. Sympathy for the underdog is an intuitive counter-reaction to the overbearing power of superbrands, but it rests on the same questionable mechanism: image over facts.

Still, the current transformations beg the question: are small companies the better option in a world of disrupted supply chains and ethical dilemmas?

The Smaller, the Better?

“Go local!” seems to be the obvious alternative to superbrands’ global approach. The appeal contains assumptions: short supply chains promise less dependency, create more transparency, and can lead to smaller ecological footprints due to less transportation and consequently less emissions.³

2 <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/about/transparency>

3 For an overview of studies pointing out advantages of local production, see <https://ilsr.org/key-studies-why-local-matters/>.

As noted earlier, smaller companies also have the charming factor of the “underdog” which comes with further positive associations: they appear more personal, less anonymous, and less hierarchical. The layers of bureaucracy to coordinate a complex large organization are not required to the same extent. Instead, processes and networks can often be maintained on a personal level which—at least potentially—helps to build empathy and awareness amongst employees and beyond internal stakeholders. Interestingly, local companies tend to care more about their externalities and areas of impact which can be highlighted with an example of negative externalities on the environmental dimension: pollution produced by business operations is hard to ignore when it happens next door and exploitation becomes more tangible when people from the same community are affected (Environmental Protection Agency 2013).

The benefits of short supply chains seem obvious: companies are less dependent on external actors, political constraints of different countries, and other circumstances that are impossible to control. No matter what the cause may be, if it is about an infectious disease, a strike, or a war, international disruptions are less likely to affect local businesses with short supply chains. Moreover, it is also easier to monitor possible disruptions and to create fairer working conditions as well as higher ethical standards.

Large corporations, on the other hand, are rather bound to the interests of their shareholders and need to therefore maximize profit on a quarterly basis, which is fostering a short-term orientation (Zhang and Andrew 2021). While still tied to the same basic market pressures, smaller companies which are often privately held, have more liberties to specialize on customer segments that are willing to spend more money for fairer products. They operate under a shareholder orientation instead of mere stakeholder orientation. As suggested by stakeholder theory, a company’s decisions should not be tailored just to the interest of shareholders, those who have invested in the company, but also to stakeholders (Harrison, Phillips, and Freeman 2020). Therefore, smaller, local companies can more easily centre their business model on fairer practices, higher ethical standards, and local production, allowing them to work with a more sustainable long-term orientation.

So, are superbrands simply too big to be fair? Are smaller companies and short supply chains the answer to the recent and future crises with the global goal to make the world more sustainable and fair? While the benefits of small and regional seem intuitively obvious, it is also clear that this approach cannot be the ultimate answer to the challenges we are facing. First of all, superbrands are likely to remain relevant, despite the problem that comes with their size. They are “too big to fail” because of their power, popularity,

and cultural significance. Not only do they feed many mouths, they can also build on a loyal customer base that identifies with their products. These are strong forces at play that will likely keep the model of superbrands relevant throughout the twenty-first century.

While small companies are well-suited to tailor to niche audiences with special interests, it is questionable if they will be able to satisfy the demand of the global mainstream. Of course, it should be mentioned that this demand, or rather, need for consumption was partly created by the pervasive advertisements of large brands, which base their business models on mass production, cheap manufacturing, short-lived garments, and over-consumption (Niinimäki et al. 2020). While this reliance on over-consumption is not helpful to make more sustainable and fairer products, smaller companies and alternative business models alone won't bring the desired change. In an article for *Harvard Business Review*, Kenneth P. Pucker (2022) dismisses sustainable fashion as a "myth." Not only does he criticize the greenwashing attempts of superbrands, he also questions if alternative business models are financially feasible and points to the fundamental flaws of market-driven solutions to the problems posed by the fashion industry:

After a quarter century of experimentation with the voluntary, market-based win-win approach to fashion sustainability, it is time to shift. Asking consumers to match their intention with action and to purchase sustainable, more expensive fashion is not working. Were consumers really willing to spend more, sifting through claims, labels and complexity is too much to ask (Pucker 2022).

Localizing markets to create fairness and sustainability might also lead to more inequality on a global scale: instead of creating progress on a worldwide level, this approach might create more or less insulated production hubs with improved conditions, while other parts of the world would be left behind. Even the challenge of disrupted supply chains will not necessarily be adequately tackled by a localization approach: not shorter, but more diverse supply chains might be the better answer to risks that are hard to foresee (Liu, Lin and Hayes 2010).

The hyper visibility of superbrands makes them an easy target for criticism and at first sight, "going local" appears as a tempting alternative that seems to avoid many of their problems. However, a closer look poses the question: is this approach rather a distraction than an answer to the fundamental challenges superbrands face?

Roadmap: The Inevitability of Fairness and Sustainability

There are good reasons to believe that superbrands are simply “too big to be fair” and to hope for better conditions under small companies. However, if “going local” cannot replace big corporations and does not offer a comprehensive strategy to cope with the problems at hand, building fairer and more sustainable corporations and supply chains is an inevitable next step. Of course, unfair conditions and unsustainable processes can and will remain to some extent. But it will become increasingly unaffordable and risky to maintain structures which are not in alignment with international human rights or environmental regulations. Climate change does not stop at organizational or national borders. The internet sheds light on injustices and connects those who have not been connected before. Collapsing supply chains reveal one-sided dependencies and there is an increasing legislative pressure to make them transparent (e.g., the German “Supply Chain Act”⁴ or the proposed “New York Fashion Sustainability Act”⁵).

Therefore, it can be concluded that superbrands are not “too big to be fair,” but they cannot change in isolation. Support as well as pressure from different actors is needed to help them navigate through large structural changes towards progress. Market incentives, regulations, political guidance, and legal frames are some examples that can facilitate these changes. It might take time until they actualize, since substantial and lasting transformations do not occur overnight. When value creation beyond financial profits is better recognized and lived up to by some superbrands, it will almost be inevitable for other superbrands to become fairer too, if they want to remain competitive.

Numerous CSR efforts are indeed being practised to enable companies to adopt better conditions (Brewer 2019). For example, independent organizations in the garment industry have created numerous *certificates* that are aimed at creating better standards:

Oeko tex:⁶ The standard indicates that the textile product is free of certain groups of harmful substances, ensuring that all certified products are harmless to health. The certification standards fall into three levels: 100, 1000, and 1000 plus as the highest and indicates that everything from fabric, threads, interlinings, hook-and-loop closures, hooks, etc., have met the criteria.

4 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/supply-chain-act-1872076>

5 <https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/in-the-news/alessandra-biaggi/new-york-could-make-history-fashion-sustainability-act>

6 <https://www.oeko-tex.com/en/our-standards>

OE-100:⁷ Indicates that a product is made from 100 per cent organic fibre that has been tracked and verified throughout the production chain. Textile Exchange awards the certification.

ZQUE:⁸ Indicates responsibly manufactured and environmentally safe wool. Wool with this accreditation has been produced in an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable manner, to high animal welfare standards, and is traceable back to its source. Most Zque wool is merino wool, raised and produced in New Zealand.

MadeBY:⁹ The sign is a label that indicates a fashion company's environmental responsibility and fair labour practices throughout the entire supply chain. The Made-By organization works with brands that use organic cotton and work with sewing factories with enforced social codes of conduct.

These efforts, while important, are certainly not sufficient, especially since they are often poorly implemented. A CSR expert from Outland Denim, an Australian denim company, explained to us: "Certifications do not resolve global issues around slavery" and stressed that companies need to go further to create fair conditions themselves. For this purpose, Outland Denim operates with different pillars which include, amongst others, special training for employees, creating educational opportunities, and paying fair wages. Furthermore, they work with people who have experienced human trafficking, to help provide the tools to support them in becoming the authors of their own futures (Outland Denim, n.d.). Our interviewee further stressed the importance of a company's genuine interest for change, highlighting that a mindset towards "people over profit" is beneficial to break free from unsustainable and unethical ways of doing business. Another example from their innovative business model is a clear focus on non-discrimination policies, female leadership empowerment, and gender equality. Furthermore, they established mechanisms that allow workers to voice their grievances through multiple channels and in distinct formats. Here, as well as during our conversation with Linnea Holter Thompson, the emphasis was on the need to offer multiple channels for this purpose. These may range from mailboxes in factories to WhatsApp, email, Weibo (China-based microblogging service), and more experimental technologies such as the crowdsourcing tool Quizrr (Arora and Thompson 2019).

There is no doubt that much more needs to be done to create fairer working conditions and more companies must centre their actions around the

7 <https://textileexchange.org>

8 <http://www.zqmerino.com/home/zq-merino/>

9 <http://www.made-by.org>

people over profit logic. But it would be wrong and contra-productive to dismiss the ongoing CSR efforts that build the road towards this future. Accordingly, when asked about common misconceptions in discussions around this topic, Thompson answered:

Many big fashion companies have seen the reports of terrible working conditions in apparel supply chains, received pressure from customers and other stakeholders, and built mature routines for human rights due diligence (Personal interview).

Clearly, such an assessment of the status quo is relative and a matter of perspective. It is not difficult to find voices with a far more critical take. For example, the aforementioned Kenneth P. Pucker (2022), who suggests completely retiring phrases such as “sustainability,” arguing that “[l]ess unsustainable is not sustainable.”

But is painting a picture in black and white really the best approach to the complex situation? If superbrands are here to stay, isn't *any* progress better than *no* progress? While critical perspectives are essential to move ahead, they should also not obscure and diminish the positive change that is being achieved every day. This could lead to fatalistic and hopeless narratives, whereas what we need is the opposite: inspiration for a fairer and more sustainable future. Since everyone can take part in this creation, people should empower colleagues and friends to create impact in their area of influence and proactively foster change. Ultimately, we cannot rely on the superbrands to create the change for us, but we should support them—and yes, even pressurize them in any way we can. However, as Pucker correctly points out, we cannot rely on markets alone to fix the situation. Immense investments, efforts for restructuring current operations, and fostering a change in consumers' buying behaviour are difficult but also inevitable steps. Maybe we can direct some of the power of superbrands towards this goal.

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11. Teachers in India and EdTech: A New Part of the Gig Economy?

Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi & Aditi Surie

Abstract

This chapter provides insights into the relationship between private EdTech platforms and the nature of employment they generate from the perspective of the firm. What does a firm look for in a tutor when they bring them on to do platform-mediated educational services? In the same vein, the chapter explores the nature of employment in the educational sector in India and its overlaps and relationships to precarious work, wages, expectations, and skilling. These two threads are tied together to project and predict whether EdTech is building gig economy work like in food delivery or mobility services.

Keywords: EdTech, gig economy, women's employment, India

The past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic have seen an increase in the growth and proliferation of Indian education technology (EdTech) companies. EdTech companies build on and modify the traditional after-school tutoring sector in India. The past five years have seen a 22-fold increase in the scale of investments in the sector with companies raising \$210 million in 2017 and \$4.7 billion in 2021. 2020 and 2021 alone have seen a combined fundraising¹ amount of \$6.1 billion.²

Data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and Quarterly Employment Surveys show that four of five school teachers in India are

¹ <https://inc42.com/features/with-3-new-unicorns-indias-edtech-startups-raised-4-7-bn-in-2021/>

² This chapter builds on a blog post published on FemLab in October 2021. <https://femlab.co/2021/10/26/will-edtech-go-the-way-of-the-gig-economy/>

women.³ Market-based evaluations of the education sector estimate that there are 30 million teaching, non-teaching, and support staff in private schools and tuition institutions, making the sector one of the top five employment avenues. This statistic is framed around a lack of jobs in the pandemic economy and a lack of job-led growth in the last five years in the Indian economy (Vyas 2019). Case studies highlight that contractual and part-time lecturers form a majority of the workforce in Indian higher education, meaning that intermittent or difficult-to-retain work with a lack of social and employment protection, frames the sector (Sukumar 2020). These numbers suggest that there is a sizeable existing worker base that could take up part-time or full-time teaching opportunities mediated through platforms.

In the context of EdTech's growth, it is crucial to scrutinize the business models companies adopt since they set up the working conditions of their gig and full-time workers, thus affecting the educators who work in the sector. Will EdTech follow the path of the dominant gig companies such as Uber or Zomato? Through the pandemic, food delivery and ride-share workers have made public the difficulties of their work in the gig economy. Often, it is said that a "labour oversupply" in the Indian economy allows for wages to be driven down even in the gig economy (Vaidyanathan 2020). Considering the large number of trained educators in India, can we expect long hours of work, poor working conditions, and continuously declining payouts? If EdTech companies follow suit and adopt such business practices, what does the future of Indian education, and more importantly, Indian educators look like? These questions animate this chapter as we see a significant change in one of the most established and formal sectors of women's employment—education—and how EdTech may shape the future of their livelihoods.

Private Tutoring in India

Tutoring in India is a large service industry which supplements K–12 schooling and entrance examination preparation into courses such as engineering, medicine, and law. Tutoring is a private industry that happens at different scales: home-based tutoring for one or a batch of students, or at a coaching institution as a part of a cohort of students. Coaching institutions have

3 <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/why-do-we-see-more-female-teachers-in-indian-schools-1806042-2021-05-23>

established a footprint across urban and rural India, with cities such as Kota, Delhi, and Hyderabad having a large number of centres. Data from the National Sample Survey report on education shows that one in five students opted for private tuitions in 2017–18 (Sukumar 2020). Through the COVID-19 pandemic, news articles suggested that private tutoring saw an adoption of online modes of delivery, even in rural India.

Particularly in school education, research shows that as more people can afford private schools instead of public government schools where education quality is often uncertain, the reliance on tutoring declines (Sukumar 2020). Often, the same teachers work multiple jobs across private schools, public schools, and coaching centres using different methods of teaching. Their work arrangements and income levels differ across the different roles.

Dominant Models in Platform-Mediated EdTech Sector in India

The leading EdTech companies in India are Byju's (raised \$5.3 billion),⁴ Unacademy (raised \$838.5 million),⁵ and Vedantu (raised \$292.9 million).⁶ All of these companies operate in the marketplace model where they decide the platform's methods of delivering educational content, the different course offerings, and fees. Crucially, the companies take charge of how the platform is marketed to prospective parents and students, and are responsible for the growth of the customer base. Content and high-quality content generation (either in-house, or through freelance educators) is the way platforms differentiate themselves from competitors, and the quality assurance/quality control (QA/QC) of the material on the platform is a key area of focus for the companies. Consequently, companies seek out the best educators for their platform, and control the pipeline from onboarding educators, training them, deciding the terms of payment, and hours of engagement. They also work with educators to familiarize them with the required technical knowhow to use their platforms.

The EdTech sector is closely tied with India's schooling and examination calendar, and therefore, the services that customers can purchase from companies are in the form of courses (e.g., Physics Class 7) or packages (e.g,

4 https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/byju-s/company_financials

5 https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/unacademy/company_financials

6 https://www.crunchbase.com/organization/vedantu-innovations/company_financials

Mathematics doubt clearance—10 sessions). Since tuitions supplement school learning, many tuition services in the offline world serve the need of “doubt clearance” which gives students access to open-ended feedback with a tutor, which they do not get in large private school classrooms (Bray and Lykins 2012). For companies, this means locking in educators into longer term arrangements, thereby creating a high level of importance for the educator’s credentials and availability. This makes it difficult for companies to replace educators once their course or package has begun. This is in stark contrast with sectors such as food delivery or ride-hailing where the volume of workers able to work for platforms is high, and the platforms are able to easily replace workers constantly. Ride-hailing and food delivery platforms use their rating systems to surveil and enforce punitive measures against workers’ service delivery. On a day-to-day basis, interactions between an educator and an EdTech company are far more hands-on than that of a Swiggy delivery partner or an Ola driver. This dynamic will be important to understand the platform power of EdTech companies and their treatment of educators.

Who are the EdTech Platform Workers?

Platform workers are essential for the functioning of the EdTech sector. Companies offer a range of services that involve a human component, and consequently, workers could be involved in the creation of new course material, offering doubt clearance sessions, answering questions on student forums, grading assignments, developing new assessments, and delivering live classes. Some companies engage workers to complete discrete, individual tasks and pay workers on a per-task basis, whereas others engage workers full-time to complete all the aforementioned tasks.

Educators that work in the traditional setup of at-home or neighbourhood tutoring centres are key target segments from where EdTech companies have been building up their educator base. Armed with venture capital financing, companies promise these educators better pay, greater flexibility with teaching timings, and a pan-India or even international student base that they can now teach. Particularly in cases where companies have developed their proprietary content and pedagogy, educators are put through different assessments on their subject matter expertise and soft skills, like how they present themselves, how they communicate, what their (at-home) teaching environment looks like, before being allowed to take on students through the platform.

Labouring as an EdTech Worker

Teaching on EdTech platforms is remote work that necessitates workers having access to a device to teach from—either a mobile phone, or a desktop/laptop, and a high-speed internet connection. Educators are locked in to teach for long durations of time (two-month crash courses on JEE Mathematics, or eight-month coding certifications, for example), and are asked for minimum time commitments per week. An educator could teach three hours a day, or close to forty hours a week. The more time educators commit to a platform, the higher their remuneration will be. During our interviews with senior management employees at EdTech companies between 2020–21, employees reported that they did not have a sense of how much time it took an educator to prepare for a particular class, or how much work went on outside the platform for the educators to perform well on their platform: they were only keeping a track of the hours spent by educators doing tasks on the platform. Also, employees said that they preferred to engage educators for their soft skills over their technical or subject knowledge. An Operations Manager at an after-school tutoring firm⁷ for K–12 students, says:

For us, being a star teacher is all about your actions and the mindset that you bring to the platform. So for me a star teacher would be someone who is extremely good and comfortable with the children that they teach. So that basically means that they are engaging the children and are building rapport and are very much involved in the learning outcome of the child. It is displayed through the way they are in the classroom: they are usually smiling, they don't snap at you, right, and they understand where as a child you are coming from and they display a lot of patience, perseverance and also have good communication skills (emphasis added) (Personal interview).

Employees also argued that their customer feedback was better for educators who managed to build a greater connection with the students. These aspects of educators' work on the platforms are continuously tracked by teams who look for aspects such as educators' physical appearance on the camera during teaching sessions, their attire and state of grooming, and their tone of communication with students and parents during and after teaching sessions. Internal to the company, educators are also encouraged to help

7 All names used in the chapter have been withheld to protect identity.

out junior educators within the company, contribute to the improvement of the product experience by sharing feedback with the company, and often go over the predetermined duration of class engagements to work with the students and ensure maximum student satisfaction.

How Are Women Faring as EdTech Educators?

While offline teaching in India has a substantial representation of women teachers, the move to the burgeoning online teaching segment has been slow. Some organizations in EdTech such as WhiteHat Junior (acquired by Byju's)⁸ exclusively hire only women educators, but other than such outliers, in our interviews, platform employees reported that men formed a large part of their educator base. Employees said that the women who do teach via EdTech platforms appreciate the flexibility of scheduling classes and the certainty it offers to their work schedules. These women educators come from a variety of backgrounds: former working professionals who dropped out of the workforce due to household commitments, recent college graduates who are studying for Master's admissions examinations, and school teachers looking to supplement their income. All these reasons for joining EdTech platforms mirror why educators start working in private tuition centres or run their own. The curriculum head at a mathematics and coding teaching platform explains the challenges of training and onboarding women teachers:

So initially when we give them [the test] I do see that women are busier or they have more work at home to do. *On an average if I have to compare, if we roll out a program once and I have 5 female teachers versus 5 male teachers, they [the men] complete it much faster and are waiting on the next round for us?* When are you going to roll out the next round, whereas I see women asking us can I have another week's time? I haven't been able to complete it—which boils down to that they don't have time, they have many other things to address? *When it is a test or something that they do on their own [and] if it is just on the system, they still do it? The minute we ask them to come for an evaluation, again, a lot of resistance.* Just a lack of confidence is what I can call it. All our mentors are generally female and we see to it that they are presenting [the assignment] to a female only. *Still you know there is a gender divide* (emphasis added) (Personal interview).

8 <https://qz.com/india/2041211/why-indias-byjus-acquired-whitehat-jr-great-learning-and-epic/>

Across interviews with EdTech platform employees, we find a pattern of issues that prevents firms from having a greater representation of women in their educator workforce. These issues cropped up when the expectations of the platform did not account for women's labour in their own homes. Employees provided examples such as women requesting extensions for completing the onboarding assessments, or women educators unable to take up teaching live classes early in the morning because they were tied up with household chores, or women unable to create new course content as fast as their male counterparts. In each case, we found that platforms prioritized their business objectives by sacrificing the flexibility that was advertised to workers, and this particularly hit women workers hard. A key question for platforms to consider if they want to prevent further exacerbation of the gender divide is—what ways can companies account for and compensate women for their time and work *outside* the platform?

In our interviews, platform employees did not report that women faced any issues of access to the infrastructure of devices, internet access, or any substantial differences in the digital knowhow across men and women. These observations do not fit the current evidence that Indian women report lower levels of access to digital technologies than men (Dewan 2020). We speculate that platforms have so far only tapped into the small proportion of women that have unrestricted access to these devices, and consequently are able to work online. This is an issue to keep track of for the present and the future: How diverse is the group of online educators at the moment? If companies continue to scale, will they provide infrastructure support to potential teachers that may not have access to the requisite hardware? What will the terms of that support be?

A common strategy adopted by gig companies in ride-sharing and food delivery is providing loans to potential workers to purchase cars or bikes that are essential to their ability to work for these companies. For such workers, this often means working for lower take-home incomes, making these loans a predatory practice instead of an enabling one. Both delivery and ride-sharing are characterized by a labour oversupply. As EdTech companies deploy their capital reserves to attract more offline educators to come online, one tactic to watch out for is how they onboard educators that do not have access to the requisite hardware infrastructure such as phones, laptops, cameras, and steady internet access. So far, we have little information on how long Indian EdTech platforms are able to retain educators. When ride-sharing companies were dealing with retention issues, they decided to lower barriers to sign up to work by providing predatory loans and using floating wages for work. How will EdTech companies respond to such a challenge?

The Way Forward—A Vision

A thoughtful way for EdTech firms to retain educators on their platform would include offering stability in wages, taking a more expansive view of what counts as “teaching time” by building in the costs of teaching and preparation time, and benefits of work such as insurance. In the context of women’s work, EdTech can offer work-from-home as a flexible option, as well as greater control over scheduling class times, but this mode of work enforces a fresh set of expectations around teaching and constant metricized performance tracking. India’s New Education Policy (NEP) drafted in 2020 suggests⁹ EdTech as the heart of how the future of schooling will look. Policymakers’ comments suggest that this approach will not be “teachers versus technology” [but] the solution is in “teachers and technology” (Kant 2021). The most digitally savvy early educators that teach through EdTech might be best placed to take advantage of this option, but as these opportunities are expanded to marginalized women, it is crucial that policymakers and governments incorporate training modules to alleviate existing digital divides.

Key to the vision of work on EdTech platforms is stability. Stability in the terms of payment, in the metrics that go into what constitutes good service, and in getting workers involved in deciding how their work gets structured. By doing this, platforms do not create incentives where educators are competing in a race to the bottom, and enable educators to have more visibility into the algorithmic processes that shape their work.

An interviewee working in the strategy team of an EdTech teaching platform shared:

Once their [women educators] mind is made, once they have decided something, they continue to pursue it instead of dropping out or slacking at a later stage (Personal interview).

Stability is the way platforms can address the challenges of bringing on board more women educators, providing their services, and ensuring their longevity.

9 https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_o.pdf

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12. Migrant Workers and Digital Inclusion in the Construction Sector in India

Shweta Mahendra Chandrashekhar

Abstract

COVID-19 left the world on the brink of a humanitarian crisis, and brought to the fore the deep-seated problems of the weak and the vulnerable—migrant populations in the Global South. In India, while governments across states have justified their efforts in addressing migrants' issues, their plight was a culmination of an already complacent system—with a lack of inclusivity. Employing a stakeholder approach, this study explores the precarity of migrants engaged in the construction sector in India, contextualizing their “engagement/dis-engagement” with technology as they attempt to access government welfare schemes amidst the COVID-19 crisis. While factors determining access to digital tools have been explored, the potential of such tools in addressing their concerns has been discussed. This study drew on interviews with heads of labour unions, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), heads of job match-making platforms, and the director of a construction company, to build a deeper understanding of their challenges.

Keywords: migrants, digital inclusion, construction sector

I was born in Lonavala and raised in Pune, both places located in the western region of India. Some of the vivid memories I have of my childhood include visits to numerous tunnel construction sites in India—Pune-Mumbai Expressway, Konkan Railway, Delhi Metro. My father's infrastructure firm has been in the business of building tunnels for more than thirty-five years, and many of our family trips in the 1990s and early 2000s included such visits. Since most of the sites were away from the city and amid mountains and forests, it was a welcome break from the din and bustle of daily city

life. As a young girl, I used to interact enthusiastically with site supervisors, engineers, and workers, sometimes even accompanying my father deep into the freshly excavated tunnels.

My most recent visit was to a tunnel construction site in Karwar, Karnataka, in December 2019. This site is near an old highway bridge constructed by the British on National Highway 4 (NH-4), dubbed by locals as “London Bridge.” My father’s company was in the middle of a time-bound construction project of a twin tube tunnel for NH-4. There were more than 250 construction workers at the site, most of them migrants from the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. With the announcement of a nationwide lockdown in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the news of a mass exodus of workers from different parts of the country started pouring in, making me anxious about the condition of my father’s site at Karwar. Upon returning home from his site, my father gave me a first-hand account of the impact of the pandemic on his site and the nationwide lockdown on the construction sector:

The construction work of tunnels is different from other works as it goes on round the clock and in three shifts per day. On the late evening of 24th March 2020, my mobile phone was ringing constantly. My site engineer was on the phone and he informed me that a nationwide lockdown had just been announced by the Prime Minister. My first reaction to this national emergency was to go to the site immediately (normally I would retire after meditation for half an hour in the evening). I reached the site and as the news had unfolded on media, the workers were agitated and wanted to return home (Personal interview, May 22, 2020).

As my father explained, the news of a sudden lockdown created anxiety and confusion amongst the workers.¹ Some of them had already connected to their families over the phone and were under pressure to return home with their full salaries. The workers were mostly migrants from the state of Odisha and Bihar who worked at the site for six months and then returned to their native homes for farming. These workers had migrated for a better life for their families and were not landless labourers. In their villages, they were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, but these occupations barely allowed them to eke out a living. They had migrated to the city to take advantage of the higher paying jobs in the construction sector.

1 https://almashines.s3.dualstack.ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/assets/media/files/266_1591946871_6f421df109b2fe807ffe16835a024788.pdf

On the one hand, my father was rushing to the government offices to obtain the release of salaries for the workers and staff before the month end; and on the other hand, he was trying to procure a month's supply of ration for those who wished to stay back at the site.

The lockdown was severe, and it was challenging to maintain the supply of ration as law enforcement agencies didn't allow any vehicles to ply. The next day I rushed to the District Collector's office and requested them to issue passes so that we were not obstructed by the law enforcement agencies as we carried rations and medical supplies to the workers (Personal interview, May 22, 2020).

He noted that a month later, the site workers began asking to return home. Some of them had genuine reasons to be home as the monsoon was closing in and they had to look after their agricultural land, for the harvest would feed their families for a year. My father continued: "We hired two private buses. After receiving permission from the government of Karnataka, one left for Odisha and another for Bihar."

The construction industry has been heavily affected by the lack of workers. According to a report in *The Indian Express*, the departure of migrant workers in the last two months had depleted the workforce by almost seventy-five per cent across the different construction sites of Pune Metro, slowing the progress to just about twenty to twenty-five per cent of the usual capacity (Rashid 2020).

Many workers were landholding farmers, who had consciously decided to migrate for better prospects. This dual role of the migrants—as farmers and construction workers—has a potential to disrupt the common perception of them as landless labourers concerned with subsistence. In his essay, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and The Terms of Recognition," Arjun Appadurai considers the capacity to aspire as a cultural capacity and not just an economic one:

Aspirations certainly have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations. And because these factors have been assigned to the discipline of economics, to the domain of the market and to the level of the individual actor (all approximate characterizations), they have been largely invisible in the study of culture. To repatriate them into the domain of the culture, we need to begin by noting that aspirations form

parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms (Appadurai 2004, 67; Rao and Walton 2004).

Thus, it becomes important to recognize that migrants are not just victims and disenfranchised, but subjects who have a capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004).

Globally, COVID-19 disrupted the lives of informal workers, particularly migrants, like never before, and brought to the fore some of the deep-seated issues and challenges that they face. In India, while governments across different states have justified their efforts in addressing the migrants' issues, their plight was a result of an already complacent system—with a lack of inclusivity.

Migration studies have highlighted the crucial role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in the diversification, the intensity, and the breadth of migrant transnational practices. Empirical studies suggest that low-skilled as well as forced migrants are empowered by the strategic use of ICTs (Diminescu 2002; Gillespie et al. 2016; Smets 2017; Dekker et al. 2018). In the early 2000s, a few empirical studies pointed out the importance of digital technologies as resources for migrants in vulnerable situations, despite persisting inequalities in terms of access, infrastructure, and digital skills (Diminescu 2002; Horst 2006; Nedelcu 2009). However, precarious migrants—i.e., those either with low economic and cultural capital or with irregular/vulnerable migration status taking advantage of digital resources—have generally remained, until recently, an overlooked topic (Leurs and Smets 2018).

Employing a stakeholder approach, this study explores the precarity of migrants engaged in the construction sector in India, contextualizing their “engagement/dis-engagement” with technology as they attempt to access government welfare schemes² amidst the COVID-19 crisis. While the factors determining access to digital tools have been explored, the potential of such tools in addressing their concerns has been discussed. This study drew on interviews with a range of stakeholders such as the heads of labour unions, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), heads of job match-making platforms, and the director of a construction company, to build a deeper understanding of their challenges.

2 <https://mahakamgar.maharashtra.gov.in/welfare-scheme-for-building-other-construction-workers.htm>

Migrant Labour in the Construction Sector—Key Issues and Challenges

The construction sector is one of the largest employers in India, possibly as elsewhere in the world. The National Sample Survey of India (2016–17)³ puts the number of construction workers in the country at over 74 million. According to the 2001 census,⁴ inter-state migrant workers make 35.4 per cent of all the construction workers in the country's urban areas. Of all the inter-state migrants in India who move out of the farm sector, construction absorbs around 9.8 per cent, making it the second most-preferred sector for migrants after retail. The report “Inclusive by Design: Cementing the Future for Informal Workers in India's Construction Sector” states that about 50 million workers are engaged in construction, which employs the largest number of informal and migrant workers.⁵ Although construction is considered to be one of the principal industries in the country, the workers remain exploited and discriminated against (Mathew 2005). Urban construction is an organized and formal sector, given its substantial share in the national economy, the capital assets that the firms control, and the number of workers they employ. However, it is the labour in the construction sector which is treated as informal because of the form of contract employment and their lack of entitlement to statutory protection and benefits (T.G. Suresh 2010).

Indian labour statistics place construction workers under the category of labour in the unorganized sector. According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector:⁶

unorganized workers consist of those working in the unorganized enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by the employers (NCEUS 2015, 3).

As the construction sector workers are under contractual employment, the workers are inducted into the sector without any formal documentation, the only record being their names entered into the muster roll of their employers. In many cases, these workers do not possess a valid identity card

3 https://mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/o/outcome_budget_2016-17.pdf/obo72481-8553-f606-e97f-2e999bc24c6f?t=1593874248171

4 https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/census_data_2001.html

5 <https://www.dasra.org/resource/inclusive-by-design-cementing-the-future-for-informal-workers-in-indias-construction-sector>

6 https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/Condition_of_workers_sep_2007.pdf

given the nature of their work (Varma 2020).⁷ In the absence of a record of their employment or wage and salary slips, the construction worker lacks any formal proof of his labour, an essential and fundamental requirement to enter into a negotiation. The situation becomes grim in case of migrant workers who are usually recruited through private firms and middlemen in the absence of a state-imposed system. They often undergo discrimination and exploitation as the contractors from the “receiving state” usually own the decision-making process, and the migrant labourers are unfamiliar with the socio-cultural fabric of this state (Choolayil and Putran 2021). Thus, the construction worker in the informal sector has little access to labour rights⁸ and the women worker⁹ faces greater discriminatory practices¹⁰ such as lesser wages, non-payment of wages,¹¹ and lack of legally mandated benefits.¹²

Social welfare measures for the construction workers are enshrined in The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) (BOCW) Act, 1996.¹³ This was a major accomplishment in providing social security and welfare protections to this workforce in India through registration procedures for workers and employers and through the establishment of state-based Welfare Boards. The preamble of the BOCW Act explains:

An act to regulate the employment and conditions of service of building and other construction workers and to provide for their safety, health and welfare measures and for other matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

However, the government implementation of these policies is largely non-existent and few construction workers across India receive any of the benefits described in law (Srivastava and Jha 2016; Pattenden 2016).

7 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8276029/#CR73>

8 Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). <https://www.sewa.org/>

9 <https://hr.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/workplace-4-0/diversity-and-inclusion/informal-women-workers-in-indias-construction-sector-earn-30-40-less-than-their-male-counterparts-report/87411569>

10 https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=irc_pubs

11 Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). <https://www.wiego.org/>

12 <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101800204>

13 <https://labour.gov.in/whatsnew/building-and-other-construction-workers-regulation-employment-and-conditions-service-act>

The hardship faced by the migrants in India¹⁴ during their journey from cities to villages during the pandemic has been well-documented¹⁵ in the media.¹⁶ Though many steps¹⁷ were taken by the central, state, and local governments¹⁸ in India to provide relief in the form of special “Shramik” trains (a special train service in India to move migrant workers stranded due to the lockdown) (Saluja 2020), free food grains,¹⁹ cash transfers,²⁰ and employment opportunities,²¹ an interview with V. Prameela, who heads the migrant workers’ project in Bengaluru for the NGO, Sampark, points out the deep-seated issues that surfaced during the pandemic due to the low registration rates of the workers. She argues,

Unawareness regarding the benefits of welfare funds is the main reason for low registration. [...] When we started our work in the year 2013, even the developers or builders were unaware of the motive behind the one per cent cess [tax/levy] under the BOCW Welfare Cess Act, 1996²² that was required to be paid to government. If this is the developer’s plight, the plight of the workers is unimaginable (Personal interview, October 13, 2020).²³

Prameela spoke of an estimated amount of INR 8,000 crore (\$1.081 billion) remaining unutilized in Karnataka’s state welfare board. She stated that in the case of the migrant workers, lack of awareness about the registration process was the main reason for their low registration numbers.

This issue of low registration of the workers in India has been the main reason for their ineligibility for receiving bailout money or cash transfers from the government. Telephonic interviews with 3,196 migrant construction

14 <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/newsfeed/2020/04/indian-migrant-workers-sprayed-disinfectant-chemical-200406104936658.html>

15 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52093220>

16 <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/row-over-buses-for-migrants-uttar-pradesh-congress-president-priyanka-gandhi-vadras-personal-secretary-booked-for-cheating-and-forgery-8385211.html>

17 <https://www.firstpost.com/india/left-led-kerala-govt-will-be-first-in-country-to-provide-insurance-free-medical-treatment-for-migrant-workers-3416142.html>

18 <https://www.news18.com/news/india/up-govt-transferred-rs-1000-to-over-10-lakh-states-migrant-workers-cm-yogi-adityanath-2668445.html>

19 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/fm-announces-free-foodgrains-for-8-crore-migrant-workers-for-2-months/articleshow/75738241.cms?from=mdr>

20 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1633546>

21 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1634566>

22 <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1996-28.pdf>

23 For more, see p. 2 of BOCW Cess Act.

workers from north and central India between March 27–29, 2020, conducted by another NGO, Jan Sahas, found that ninety-four per cent of the interviewed workers did not have BOCW cards, making them ineligible for any transfer. Further, fourteen per cent did not have ration cards and seventeen per cent did not have bank accounts (Trivedi 2020). Clearly, not every BOCW is registered with the Welfare Boards and not every registered BOCW has benefitted from cash transfers.

In India, the criteria for registration are determined by the state governments (Building and Other Workers {Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service} Act, 1996). For example, in Delhi, a certificate from a registered trade union suffices to get a construction worker registered with the state BOCW Welfare Board, while for a worker in Uttar Pradesh, a builder's certificate specifying that they were involved with the construction activity for ninety days in the last twelve months is required. Often the builders/contractors do not issue such certificates, making workers ineligible for registration with the board. In Delhi, the labour department last year made the registration process more extensive, requiring every applicant to fill out a twelve-page form. In addition, many workers routinely fall off the safety net due to their inability to stick to the compulsory annual renewal. For example, the number of registered construction workers in Delhi fell from over 300,000 to 40,000 between 2015 and 2020 (Barman 2020).

In order to address this issue, the central government in India has planned multiple welfare measures,²⁴ including: fast-tracking the registration of the left-out workers; nation-wide portability of benefits through the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme;²⁵ universalization of social security schemes on health insurance through Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna (PM-JAY);²⁶ life insurance cover through Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY);²⁷ disability insurance cover through Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY);²⁸ life-long pension during old age through Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan Yojana (PM-SYM);²⁹ and provisions for transit accommodations in large cities.

24 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/india-s-migrant-construction-workers-an-analysis-of-their-welfare-framework-79551>

25 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/one-nation-one-ration-card-system-explained-6410179/>

26 <https://pmjay.gov.in/>

27 <https://licindia.in/Home/Pradhan-Mantri-Jeevan-Jyoti-Bima-Yojana>

28 <https://nationalinsurance.nic.co.in/en/about-us/pradhan-mantri-suraksha-bima-yojana>

29 <https://maandhan.in/shramyogi>

However, there could be several hits and misses in implementation of these schemes in the absence of proper data on migrant registry. An intent-impact gap would thus be created in access to these welfare measures planned by the government. In his interview, the General Secretary of Construction Workers Federation of India, V. Sashikumar cited that the reforms of the government could be fruitful if they involve all stakeholders that reflect the voices of the informal workers. According to him,

Central government's new agenda involves centralization of power; opposite of what we need now—"Decentralization" is the need of the hour as it empowers the state boards and other organizations like the unions and NGOs to work at grassroots level and address local developmental needs (Personal interview, October 15, 2020).

The Digital Welfare State and Migrant Realities

With the advent of the digital revolution, governments across the world have adopted strategies to transform public services through technology. In India too, most of the welfare schemes of central, state, and local governments are operated as a Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT) programme where cash is transferred directly in the bank accounts of beneficiaries. The DBT programme is built on the convergence of Jan Dhan bank account, Aadhaar (biometric-authenticated unique identification number), and mobile number, and is called the JAM trinity³⁰ in popular parlance. Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) is a financial inclusion programme started by the Government of India in 2014 to cover all unbanked households in India, aiming to provide affordable financial services to rural as well as urban households.³¹ However, the anticipated benefit of this ambitious scheme was put to test during the pandemic when it was evident that a large number of migrant workers were excluded from access to benefits and entitlements due to non-portability of entitlements.

The findings of the rapid assessment conducted by ActionAid in 2020 on 177 returnee migrant workers in fifteen districts of Bihar reported that eighty-nine per cent of the time, they could not avail any government

30 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/all-you-wanted-to-know-about-jam-trinity/article22511736.ece>

31 <https://pmjdy.gov.in/>

Table 12.1 Reasons for not availing government schemes during lockdown (Sapkal, Shandilya and Suresh 2020).

No Bank Account	19
No Aadhar Account	28
Unaware	36
Insufficient documents (excl Aadhar card)	63
Migration	83
Documents and bank account linked are not with Aadhar	89

schemes due to the lack of their Aadhaar being linked to bank accounts and other documents (Sapkal et al. 2020; see also table 12.1).

The biometric registration, Aadhaar or the Unique Identity (UID) project, has been around since 2009, which was marketed as voluntary, and geared towards the poor. It was intended to include the undocumented into the system so as to be able to correctly disseminate the social benefits to the right individuals. In 2012, with the passage of the Aadhaar Bill by the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, it became mandatory for all citizens to have an UID, otherwise they would be denied the entitlements as well as any government services (Arora 2019). Allowing the government to link the delivery of all its schemes and social welfare to Aadhaar, including the disbursement of all benefits and subsidies, is a possible barrier to the receipt of social transfers, as in the case of the migrant workers. In a country where millions are homeless and labour year-round in harsh manual work which wears out fine fingerprints, these are very real concerns (Gelb and Clark 2013a; 2013b). Moreover, Lyon (2003) pointed out that identification by biometrics leads to “social sorting,” i.e., a biased treatment of some groups, especially marginalized ones, such as irregular migrants.

In 2015, the Prime Minister of India linked PMJDY—a national financial inclusion scheme—to Aadhaar in order to improve access to banking, remittance, credit, insurance, and pensions (Subramanya 2015). However, a survey by the NGO Indus Action, focused on policy implementation between April 6 and May 30, 2020, covering 5,242 families across eleven states of India, found that only fifty-nine per cent of the 2,233 women eligible for Jan Dhan reported that they had received the benefit,³² thirty-four per cent said they did not receive the transfer, and seven per cent said they did not know if they received the benefit (Patel, Divakar and Prabhakar 2020). Account dormancy due to infrequent usage and limited access to banks

32 <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/maharashtras-first-economic-dole-rs-2000-cash-for-12-lakh-construction-workers-6368738/>

in rural areas were the main reasons cited by the respondents. The survey assessed the beneficiaries' access to rations, employment status, healthcare, and government schemes, and pointed out that almost forty per cent of Jan Dhan account holders could not access the government's COVID-19 relief.³³

A minimum digital literacy, however, is necessary for workers to harness the internet for availing banking services from their mobile phones. In his interview, the General Secretary of the Construction Workers Federation of India, V. Sashikumar spoke of the positive transformational potential of digital technologies that might work in favour of workers, while increasing their registrations:

Digitalization can be a pathway to formalization of the construction sector in India, provided the workers are imparted with basic digital knowledge and most importantly, an awareness is generated amongst them about the benefits of gaining digital literacy in itself (Personal interview, October 15, 2020).

He pointed to the fact that the workers employed in the construction sector mostly come to the city from rural areas in search for better prospects, and they generally lack digital literacy, which becomes a barrier to registration. In this regard, the government's flagship Digital India³⁴ programme, along with other initiatives taken by the private sector (such as the Google India and Tata Trusts' initiative Internet Saathi),³⁵ could prove beneficial in improving digital literacy³⁶ among the rural community if implemented in true letter and spirit.

The President of the Construction Workers' Federation of India (CWFI), Sukhbir Singh, however, in his interview expressed his dissatisfaction on the way the entire digitization process of the workers' online registration is carried out in the country:

Undoubtedly, digital technology and platforms can play a significant role in formalizing this sector, conditional to the process remaining corruption-free (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

33 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2020/mar/27/15-crore-unregistered-construction-workers-in-the-lurch-sans-relief-2122056.html#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20Government%20of%20India's,are%20registered%20with%20welfare%20boards>

34 <https://digitalindia.gov.in/>

35 <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/future-of-work/internet-saathi-improving-digital-literacy-among-women/50951/1>

36 <https://nasscomfoundation.org/national-digital-literacy-mission/>

In this regard, he pointed to many north Indian states, including Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and Rajasthan, where online registration of the BOCW has sown seeds of corruption.

He further added,

The government approved Common Service Centers that aim to provide assistance to the workers regarding their online registrations and educating the digitally illiterate, are run by private companies—who have started charging unfair prices to the workers under the pretext of faulty paperwork (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

As a part of National E-Governance Plan Scheme, Common Service Centers are physical facilities for delivering e-services to rural and remote locations where availability of computers and internet was negligible or absent.

The President of Inter-State Migration Workers' Federation of Karnataka in another interview on migrant challenges spoke on the issue of digital harassment that keeps the workers away from registration. According to him,

this online application process (of registration) is very cumbersome for these unorganized workers, for interstate migrant workers; it is just like a “digital harassment.” The President explained the twin challenges for these workers—of being unorganized and as being migrants, that possibly pushes them towards exploitation. He further adds, “the migrants face a huge language barrier in the host states, making the online registration process difficult for them (Personal interview, August 5, 2021).

It is thus understood that apart from the exploitation that the migrant workers face in the informal sector, they are prone to cultural discrimination in the host states, aggravating their precarities.

The interview narratives showcase that such loopholes in implementation of the digital platforms and services are indicative of poor governance that needs an overhaul to address the issues of informal migrant workers.

Scope for Social Protection? A Roadmap for Inclusion through Informal Channels

With the institutional structures and measures of social protection by the government showing lack of inclusivity, other informal channels in India have emerged during the pandemic to provide relief to the informal

workers. Globally, smartphones, together with applications like WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as global positioning system (GPS) devices, have become tools of strategic intervention and created possibilities for distressed migrants to connect with activists and state actors (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020).

Recent mobile apps in India such as Bharat Shramik,³⁷ MyRojgaar,³⁸ and Mazdoor³⁹ showcase the potential of digital technologies to assist the workers in these testing times. For instance, Bharat Shramik uses its match-making technology to help employers find suitable workers in their area from their worker database. Interviewing the CEO of Bharat Shramik, Akshat Mittal, it was found that the pandemic has generated new job demands with around 100,000 workers and employers registering themselves on their newly launched portal. He explained that “our goal is to create a reshuffled skill map of India because after COVID-19, the skills have also shuffled with the migrated workers.” He pointed out that due to the reverse migration, the skills of the workers have also reshuffled across states, where the migrant worker now creates demand for work in his home state rather than the host state. On asking about the issue of registration of the worker on the portal, he said that

the workers need to just register themselves through a call and we are now upgrading and thinking of implementing solutions like Shramik ID as a step towards organizing the unorganized sector (Personal interview, September 17, 2021).

The collected data is made available to prospective employers who are struggling to find the right kind of workers, as their previous employees have migrated. The employers, in turn, register and search for workers based on their skill requirements in a particular location.

Such portals driven by technology could possibly eliminate the long-standing monopolies of middlemen who have become an indispensable part of the construction industry, contributing further to the informality of the sector. According to Sukhbir Singh,

the “big” construction companies subcontract the work to small contractors or “dalals” [middlemen], who in turn employ the labourers in dire

37 <https://www.bharatshramik.in/>

38 https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.vegavid.myrojgaar&hl=en_IN&gl=US

39 https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.oofbox.mazdoor&hl=en_IN&gl=US

need of employment—eventually making them victims of exploitation (Personal interview, October 11, 2020).

His interview revealed that though these “dalals” (middlemen) play an important role in employing the migrant workers, it comes at the expense of the workers’ security, given that they are not employed by these big companies directly or by the government, eventually landing them in contractual and informal employment. Digital platforms seem to hold a promising future for the workers if leveraged ethically and efficiently with full awareness of their plight. As empowerment is closely related to agency, in this case, the precarious migrants’ capacity to make “conscious decisions” to use ICTs to overcome migration process constraints (Şanlier Yüksel 2020), strong symbiotic efforts from NGOs, labour unions, government think tanks, and policymakers is needed to resolve the problems and concerns of the workers before they get institutionalized. With India embarking on its journey to attain the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 8) “Decent Work and Economic Growth for all,” it needs to be seen how far it has achieved the provision of “productive dignified employment to its citizens.”⁴⁰ Economic growth propelled by decent work is the only way to unlock true human potential and raise the quality of life for all.

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40 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>

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Networks



13. What Lies in the Shadows of a Stakeholder Analysis? A Methodological Analysis to Contextualize the Lives of Women Workers in the Global South

Chinar Mehta

Abstract

To bring about social system change through action research, a study of the pattern of relationships between the paradigms of the system is essential. Such a stakeholder analysis, however, can deem invisible the human dimension that is fraught with cultural stigma, inequality, and precarity. At FemLab, we centre the lives of women workers to understand how digital communication tools can be leveraged to open up possibilities of work or to get better bargaining power by collectivizing. Through the “shadows of context” proposed by Eskerod and Larsen (2018), I argue that we can arrive at a more thorough understanding of the past, present, and future needs of women labourers. Through primary and secondary data from different sectors, I provide evidence of the challenges in a traditional understanding of stakeholder analysis. Additionally, I describe how contextual understanding can visibilize stakeholders and give a richer understanding of stakeholder intents and motives.

Keywords: stakeholder, women, labour, methodology, informal, work

Introduction

With hundreds of millions of people without regular access to toilets, India is ranked number one in open defecation globally (Rubin and Kapur-Gomes 2020). While measures have been taken to fix the broken sanitation system in India, like constructing new toilets in rural and urban areas, many of these

toilets remain unused and defunct (“Many Swachh Bharat Toilets Defunct, Unusable: MPs’ Panel,” 2019). Long power cuts and acute water shortages have rendered thousands of such toilets unusable in India (Akhilesh 2021). While the burden of maintaining the toilets falls on the sanitation workers, the sanitation system remains institutionally disconnected from the water or electricity system. Across India, the continued challenges to the *Swachh Bharat Mission* (Clean India Campaign) have thrown light on these institutional failures and the socio-cultural politics of sanitation work (Prasad and Ray 2019). This keeps many of the newly constructed toilets unused.

Rooted in typical project management terminology, system change is defined as

the emergence of a new pattern of organization or system structure... [t]hat pattern being the physical structure, the flows, and relationships or the mindsets or paradigms of a system, it is also a pattern that results in the new goals of the system (Brown 2021).

This pattern of relationships is essentially what can be understood to be a stakeholder analysis. As a methodology, stakeholder analysis is employed in a variety of industries and is tied to any kind of project management. It helps with understanding connections between things and identifying root causes. However, it often deems invisible the human dimension that is long fraught with cultural stigma, inequality, and precarity.

In this chapter, I explore the methodological possibilities of centring the lived experiences of women workers in India to alter the mainstream understanding of a project stakeholder analysis. A stakeholder analysis based on reductionism may help narrow down the parameters, thereby preventing data or cognitive overload. However, in changing circumstances, a detailed analysis of stakeholders helps develop a more nuanced response.

I provide evidence of a more thorough understanding through two data sources. My primary data comes from in-depth interviews with women workers loosely associated with the sanitation sector who work at a waste sorting company. This company offers services of collection of waste from residential colonies in Hyderabad, India, sorting according to recycling needs, and eventually the sale of sorted materials. It employs mostly women workers for most of the tasks involved in sorting and even collection, with male workers accompanying in tasks involved in the collection. Since the sorting facility is located at an industrial area in Hyderabad, most workers had previously worked in other manufacturing units nearby. I visited the sorting facility between October 2021 to January 2022, and spoke to women

workers performing various tasks at the facility. These tasks included tying empty bags used for waste collection, emptying bags full of plastic waste, sorting them, tagging them, and identifying the type of plastic. Factory jobs are predominantly marked by precarity due to various structural and personal issues. Factories sometimes shut down, work is outsourced depending on changing circumstances, or wages may be inadequate for the workers' needs.

Women face this precarity due to social and familial obligations that may restrict their eventual entry into the workforce on their terms. The FemLab project aims to study how digital communication technologies may aid in making working conditions better for women, either by opening up possible work opportunities or by collectivizing for better bargaining power with management. To this end, my secondary data source involves a literature review of the sectors which are part of the FemLab project, namely, construction, gig work, and sanitation. Given the limited research in women's collectives and the socio-technical arrangements in diverse sectors, this cross-sectoral approach allows for collaborative borrowing of empirical insights. This can foster easier transferences to these sectors for actual impact.

FemLab Stakeholder Management: In Pursuit of the Invisible

Informal sectors have a workforce that seems scattered. This means that identifying stakeholders can be a challenging task. Important stakeholders are usually identified from the following domains: international actors, governmental (ministries and local governments), political (legislators), labour unions, private or for-profit organizations, non-profit organizations (NGOs), and in some cases, civil society organizations (CSOs) (Schmeer 2000). Essentially, the analysis (usually) reveals the impacts of a state policy initiative on various parties, which may be individuals, aggregates of individuals, or organizations. Proponents of stakeholder analysis argue that it enables the efficient and effective completion of a policy or a project that is *most* acceptable to all parties involved (Andersen et al. 2009).

Stakeholder analysis is derived from a research paradigm that values the different experiences of stakeholders with the "same" reality. Take, for instance, the use of machines in sewer cleaning in India and Bangladesh. Sally Cawood and Amita Bhakta (2021), urban studies scholars, write that sewer-cleaning robots and machines have been rolled out somewhat effectively. Still, one of the issues that truck drivers and helpers face is that

the machine parts are not locally available. So, while the health risks of workers are seemingly solved using machines, the workers face a reality not accounted for by the policymakers. In part, our research also seeks to identify and amplify stakeholders whose voices have so far not been heard.

Entering the Rabbit Hole

I identify two key challenges in this process. Firstly, in India, where approximately 450 million workers are employed in the informal sector (Sharma 2020), revealing all the relevant stakeholders proves to be a monumental task that never truly concludes. The sectors that we have picked for this research have been based on the existing structures of terms and conditions, collectivization, and the precarity faced by women workers. Each sector has its unique circumstances. Moreover, some stakeholders, such as middlemen who supply labour or connect workers to potential markets, only appear as and when we examine the field. Making a stakeholder map, then, becomes a fraught but creative exercise. Consequently, a second challenge lies in estimating how localized we keep our stakeholder analysis. I examine this challenge in the next section.

Each sector has its unique networks of stakes, and a stakeholder analysis begins to reveal gaps in communication within these networks. Sanitation work, in which we largely focus on workers who are employed within the public infrastructure, includes cleaning and sweeping of houses, streets, roads, institutional premises, railway lines, train toilets, community, and public toilets, drains, and sewers. At the outset, the specific work we are looking at consists largely of government stakeholders at varying levels—national, state, and local. While local CSOs are crucial to understanding collectivization, advocacy efforts are also directed toward legislative policy formulation.

For instance, there are clusters of domestic workers in Hyderabad locally, but many issues faced by domestic workers may only be mitigated by a central law since workers commonly cross interstate boundaries (SEWA 2014). This is even more necessary considering that employers in this sector are largely individuals and scattered across the city. On the other hand, sanitation work undertaken by local governments, while formalized to an extent, is closely linked to private manufacturers, contractors, and research institutions. But each of these entities is diverse; for instance, while the role of contractors has largely to do with supplying labour, contractors may be corporations or individuals. Depending on the unique conditions

of contractual labour, CSOs channel their advocacy efforts toward the contractors. Moreover, manufacturers and research institutions have to collaborate closely to develop and produce machines that help in sanitation work. However, the presence of only a few large-scale manufacturers and scattered local suppliers makes product differentiation and development difficult. This points to a gap in communication within the stakeholder network.

We have noted that even though we have a stakeholder map from secondary research, many stakeholders only become visible as we go into the field. A preliminary analysis of the construction sector immediately reveals that while it is a sector that employs a significant number of workers in India, particularly women, it is highly diffused with organizations at the local level. Here, too, contractors and builders are a diverse group of stakeholders. As we begin to go into the field, we see that labour contractors in the construction sector are mostly those who got promoted from among the workers themselves and have strong ties with the community based on geographical and social location. Depending on these ties, the involvement of the contractors, and what they imagine to be their stake in the workers' welfare will emerge from the field. Similarly, in the sanitation sector, issues faced by those belonging to a particular state or culture are championed by groups from that region. These underlying ties transcend workplace identities *because* of workplace precarity; workers might switch jobs but stay connected to their neighbours, friends, and domicile village ties. Such stakeholders are rarely part of a formal or official network of stakeholders, but appear as parts of a rich social life beyond worker identities.

Pinning Down Emerging Stakeholders

Pinning specific stakeholders when digital tools are involved needs more thought; digital platforms seem simultaneously centralized and decentralized. For instance, the supply chain in platformized work is largely opaque. In the platform salon work, particularly, issues faced by women workers remain highly localized, depending on customer responses. Even so, platform policies are formulated at a much higher level in the corporation. As Sai Amulya Komarraju (2021) writes,

Customers and their experience and satisfaction are placed at the apex since they bring business, and software engineers enable “extra-legal” mechanisms (rating, tracking, etc.) to monitor the service partners through

the app in order to ensure the quality of services. Even though service partners are considered as a crucial resource (SDE 3), the oversupply of workers compared to the demand, and control mechanisms in the form of rating and reviews serve to maintain power asymmetries between the platform, customer, and the service partner.

Defining stakes then takes on the challenge of translating the language of the women workers to what can be included in the language that is actionable by developers and managers who develop the platform.

There may be emerging stakeholders that work in collaboration with traditional stakeholders. Take the sanitation sector as an instance. When the Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC) introduced watches with a global positioning system (GPS) to surveil sanitation workers (Shantha 2020), the workers and other activists opposed the move. What is important to note here is that NMC collaborated with a Bengaluru-based IT company to use these rented watches to track the movement of all sanitation workers. The IT company, in this case, is a relevant stakeholder that, until even a few years ago, would not have been associated with this sector. On the other hand, we also find that emerging stakeholders may introduce us to view digital collectivization as an alternative, as diffused as these stakeholders may be. For instance, Facebook groups where domestic workers across the world make a community help them to articulate their common concerns, fostering a sense of solidarity and community (Almendral 2020). The members of such groups and the platform corporation are all stakeholders of different kinds, and the stakes would have to be defined with the end goal of collectivization in mind.

What's in It for Me—Rethinking Stakeholder Logics

Previous work on stakeholder mapping exercises has critiqued the reductionist approach that this methodology may seem to encourage. Traditional stakeholder analyses assume that stakeholder behaviours are only guided by rational, individualized concerns (Eskerod and Larsen 2018). “What's in it for me?” the stakeholder asks. Instead, the authors argue for an approach that takes into account the politics of “the history, the present, and the expectations of the future,” which they collectively operationalize as “shadows of the context” (Ibid., 5–6). Such an approach moves away from a study of individual projects and also includes “shadow of the past” and “shadow of the future” (Ibid., 6).

The move towards “shadows of contexts” has been propounded by researchers from the Global South in different disciplines, particularly those that have to do with software technology and design. Researchers from the Global South have pointed to the Western-centric approach to technology through the values and techniques it espouses (Winschiers-Theophilus and Bidwell 2013). Previously, there has been an attempt to design software for “different cultures.” Here, “other” cultures become analytic categories with certain seemingly fixed attributes. Rather, culture is about the everyday practices that may be marred with local tensions, negotiations, and fluidity. These tensions should remain at the centre of a thorough stakeholder analysis. By focusing on the everyday practices of women workers, I argue that we can arrive at stakeholders previously missed and a better understanding of their intents and motives.

A contextual understanding of women’s work in India and elsewhere reveals issues that a direct stakeholder analysis may miss. For instance, large-scale quantitative research shows that unemployed working-age women benefit from digital literacy programmes (Mukherjee et al. 2019). Similarly, the use of Unified Payments Interface (UPI), an instant bank transfer application developed by the National Payments Corporation of India, seems to be growing without refrain.¹ However, this technology remains largely unused by low-income women² (Menacherry and Jagannathan 2021). I found evidence of this during my time in the field from September 2021 to December 2021, in that even women who had their own smartphones did not manage their own bank account via UPI. Either they said that they did not need to, or that they did not know how to use it. Shailja,³ a thirty-seven-year-old worker originally from Odisha, said that it was her husband’s phone number that was associated with the bank account her wages were transferred to. She added that she was afraid of “doing something wrong” as she did not understand the system confidently. She was otherwise what can be considered “digitally literate,” i.e., knew how to use her smartphone to install applications, use instant messaging, and download videos and music for entertainment.

1 <https://www.timesnownews.com/business-economy/industry/upi-largest-retail-payment-transaction-platform-in-india-economic-survey-2021-22-article-89248444>

2 Menacherry and Jagannathan provide an interesting solution to this. They recommend that awareness should be brought about UPI at the level of Jan Dhan Yojana, a financial inclusion programme that provides access to financial services. Additionally, they also write that a UPI ID (in the format of “abc@xyx”) should be provided right at the time of creating a bank account and individuals should be taught how to use it.

3 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

At the sorting facility mentioned earlier in this chapter, the workers may be tasked with scanning the barcodes of the materials they are sifting through. A rudimentary software that lists the products was used for this purpose. Despite the software being quite simple to use,⁴ few workers were trained for this task. Seema, a twenty-eight-year-old worker local to Hyderabad, informed me with a proud smile that she was able to pick up on the system in just two days. Those from the engineering team, who were responsible for training her to use a work-related technology, become important stakeholders in the process. Training for the use of technology at work itself may help low-income women gain confidence about using digital tools, instead of relying on a process largely disconnected from their experience of work. If the use of technology leads to growth in their work and some kind of upskilling, women workers are more likely to adopt it and feel joyful at having learned a new skill.

Even amidst emerging relationships in the sanitation sector, such as new entrants in the market who employ sanitation workers, social groups that already existed remain the primary form of support for women workers. For instance, Preeti, a thirty-year-old woman who moved from Bihar around three years ago to work in Hyderabad, spoke to me about an issue that her sister faced when she started working at the same company. Her sister did not have her Aadhaar card at the time of looking for employment. While it was mandatory at the aforementioned sorting facility to have an Aadhaar card, it was the existing group of workers from Bihar who appealed to management to hire her while she waited for her Aadhaar card, which was under process. This was the group of women who had their meals together while at work, knew each other outside of work, and some of them were even neighbours. The linguistic and cultural identity that they shared was an integral part of their workplace identity as well.

Conclusion

Through primary and secondary evidence, I explore the contribution that a concept such as “shadows of context” can make to stakeholder analysis. While systemic change may be necessary to see many social action projects through, an inclination to centre lived experiences helps reveal many

4 The procedure was simple; the worker would scan the barcode and the material would be listed. Most times, the worker simply had to wait for a success message to appear on screen. If that did not happen, either they would manually note down the material or put it aside for further investigation.

patterns that may otherwise remain invisible. Specifically, technologies that are made for the purposes of inclusion would benefit from design changes from everyday practices and articulation of needs by the very people it seeks to help. This methodological change is time-consuming; in-depth interviews and participant observation will require more time. Additionally, there is a risk of data overflow wherein the complexity of stakeholder motive, and intent may be difficult to sieve from large texts. However, the richness of data helps in responding well and in a timely fashion to changing circumstances in the field. Project representatives need to learn new tools to create these rich pictures which can draw out the “shadows of contexts” and provide a more holistic view of the field.

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14. Why Stories Matter for Representation, Action, and Collectivization

Siddharth Peter de Souza & Siddhi Gupta

Abstract

In this essay, we reflect on our storytelling experiences and processes at FemLab and focus on what storytelling can achieve for a project that operates within a similar framework. We explore the role of stories as devices to document concepts, ideas, and experiences, and argue for its importance to build not just agency, but also present different imaginations and vocabularies of people's lived realities. Through an examination of different project outputs, we reflect upon the method of storytelling, thinking of it as a process, and a mechanism through which these different perspectives are documented, while at the same time, reflecting on its meaning for us as storytellers and translators of stories.

Keywords: storytelling, legal design, accessibility, activism

Introduction

Across different sites of work, research at FemLab has brought to attention the life of workers in the platform economy. This includes situations where algorithms are managing and controlling the ways in which workers respond to requests, reviews, and feedback from customers (Bansal 2020), cases where platforms are continuously preventing workers from being visible by determining their place of work, as well as their work timings (Kommaraju 2021), and instances where workers are using social media to find support ecosystems. Each instance contains a complex set of characters, contexts, and emotions, and in this piece, we reflect on why an important component of the project is to find ways to tell stories about the project, and stories about the workers.

Stories give us ways to document and expand concepts. They are devices through which experiences can be shared, issues can be identified; and ways to interact and respond to a variety of situations (Bell 2019). Stories are important to construct an understanding of people, of places, and of contexts, as they offer narratives, counter narratives, and help to problematize linear understandings of issues (Sharma 2019).¹ Stories also have the potential to represent different points of views; they have the power to silence and make invisible the views of some, and thereby shape how people remember, acknowledge, and interact with different situations (Wånggren 2016).

Our area of concern regarding stories is how best to ensure that we can demystify information about how people work and exist within a legal framework of processes, laws, authorities, and rights (de Souza 2020a). This translates into addressing an information overload which is difficult to access, understand, and use for those who aren't experts in the subject area. This creates the premise for a design problem. One interpretation of working at the intersection of law and design is to make this information accessible and usable for its diverse users.

Storytelling is a method that facilitates this design process; it delivers the information that has a place in everyday life in a relatable format (Cavarero 2000). The nature of information and its users render themselves to the process of storytelling.

At Justice Adda,² a law and design social venture, we have worked with a variety of information—laws, procedures, and particular acts—which exists for every person, which makes it a large, diverse group of people. We are dealing with different age groups, social backgrounds, educational qualifications, access to technology, awareness, and so on. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to speak to all these people with one designed output. Storytelling cuts across these differences. The information relates to experiences and situations, hypothetical and real, which make for great stories. In this essay, we reflect on the method of storytelling, thinking of it as a process and a mechanism through which these different perspectives are documented, while at the same time, reflecting on its meaning for us as storytellers and translators of stories. We do this through examining examples from our own work at Justice Adda and through the work we have done at FemLab.

1 <https://narrativearts.org/story-guide/>

2 <https://www.justiceadda.com/>

Stories Matter Because Voices Matter

FemLab looks at ecologies of women working in different sectors such as salons, construction, sanitation, ride-hailing, and artisanal work (Arora and Raman 2020). Over the past two years, researchers from the team have been working across field sites in India and Bangladesh to understand the lived realities of women workers. The field notes, interviews, observations, and analyses form the basis for the stories that we have sought to represent and translate, and the characters, situations, and challenges are real, and convey the different ways in which workers' lives have had to deal with upheavals, and successes within their sectors. The stories have different audiences—academia, workers, platform companies, and the general population—which may be indirectly influencing the work such as customers and the government.

Stories speak to all these audiences. They allow us to share more than just a synthesis of information. In a project that hopes to bring to the fore ways of working that are often ignored, storytelling allows us to break through and present the reality in not just its essence, but in its multi-dimensional reality—which includes the who, where, how, why and what.

Stories are experiences. For instance, in the process of working on a story about bangle makers, it became important to think about the implications of the story (Raman 2021). When we share the process of making a bangle in the voice of the bangle maker, recording the challenges, the different parts played by her family, the aspirations, the reasons for doing it, and present it in a visual animation, it does two things. One, it makes the experience representative and relatable. It aims to make it real for those who had no idea about the struggles and existences of the bangle maker, but it also aims to provide agency such that the story is told by the bangle maker through our work as a medium (Parvin 2018). Second, an animation provides a lot of visual information, it gives the bangle maker a face, it depicts where she lives, what she makes, and captures the imagination of our viewers in more ways than one. It depicts her reality and her context.

The Audience of a Story and Their Role in Its Design

In the use of storytelling, a key consideration is who is the story for. Is it a story that is meant to raise awareness about a particular issue?³ Is it a story

3 In our project "Covid-19 and the Constitution," we created an interactive timeline that documents law and policy responses to COVID-19 and places them in the context of Fundamental

to provide an alternative narrative to the prevailing dominant story?⁴ Is it a story meant to give feedback to the groups who are represented in the story to be tools for action within those groups? These are not mutually exclusive, and oftentimes, stories have multiple functions and overlapping audiences.

In thinking about the different potential audiences for a story, we are guided by principles from a design justice framework. This framework “rethinks design processes, centres people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.”⁵

For instance, in reimagining the contractual terms of a worker employed by a platform that provides services for salon work, we discussed that the starting point of the contract rather than being from the standpoint of the existing legal document of the company, needed to be in terms of the ways in which the workers themselves articulated and understood their rights and entitlements (de Souza 2020b). As a result, the understanding of rights in this context, and allied concepts of justice, fairness, grievance, were formulated keeping in mind the lived reality of the worker, and how the dispute emerged in their context (Merry and Levitt 2017).

Doing so was deliberate, keeping in mind the audience for the story. In this case, the workers were not just receptors of information, but active participants in its design, and life thereafter.

The Matter of Different Stories and Different Reactions

The stories we have told at FemLab are different in nature (de Souza and Gupta 2021). There are stories about values and principles that underpin the framing of the project, there are stories about things, which are summaries of ideas and contexts, documentations of conversations, snippets of the lives of workers, and statements of fact. There are also stories about advocacy, about ideal states of being, about calls for action, and about building communities.

Rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution: <https://www.justiceadda.com/covid19andthe-constitution>. For more, see Divan et al. 2022.

4 We organized an online conference on “Plural Ideas of Justice: Stories, Narratives and Experiences from India.” The conference explored ideas of justice that emerge from different and diverse methods of conflict resolutions. This included but was not limited to conflict resolution practices, seeking justice through digital platforms or in the form of protests or through community-based forums such as collectives, religious tribunals, etc. See <https://www.justiceadda.com/conferenceoutputs> for more.

5 “Read the Principles.” <https://designjustice.org/read-the-principles>

Stories deliver an “arc” (Lupton 2017)—they create an experience for the user which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It makes the information believable and contextual. But what happens afterwards? There are layered objectives that we as designers hope to achieve from this exercise. The first step is creating access to information. The next step is solidarity and support, where we hope users of this information will become agents that will share the outputs with their circles. Beyond this is advocacy; where stories can change ways of thinking and users actively voice their opinions on the issue shared. Last but not the least, is collectivizing, where users organize themselves and take the dialogue forward; they discuss and become a part of the larger conversation.

At Justice Adda, how information becomes a story is a process. Sometimes the stories, their audience, and hence their formats are apparent, sometimes not so much. For example, we conducted a workshop with the FemLab team to understand our interpretations of feminist collectives. This was intended to value, share, and borrow from our experiences and understandings and not limit ourselves to the literature we were reviewing. While this workshop could be limited to the FemLab team, we decided to share the findings and its mechanics with those who may be interested to find out more (de Souza and Gupta 2021). The team’s responses were influenced by the stories they heard in the field. We wanted to create outputs that would allow other interested parties to be able to share their stories, understanding, and interpretation of feminist collectives. This led to the development of workshop templates which can be printed and used by individuals and groups to conduct a similar workshop.

Different stories provoke different emotions. For instance, in our story about women cab drivers, the story is driven by a need to rethink stereotypes about the lives of women drivers, and provide an understanding of their conceptions of freedom, safety, independence (Bansal 2021). In the story about the abandoned public toilet, we have explored the importance of locating a distinction between an intervention and its actual use, thereby highlighting the importance of design not being abstract but situated in nature (Mehta 2021). Translating information into visual storytelling outputs for platforms like Instagram, allows users to easily share this information with their virtual friends, show support through likes and shares, and create new channels and hashtags to collectivize and form new communities.

For a project like FemLab, where there is immense scope for action, our outputs aim to reflect this spirit. Going through field notes from research with partners of an online salon service, we hope the stories convey the realities that were revealed in those interviews, documenting narratives

that are otherwise not as prominent in mainstream reportage of the nature of work. We were curious in how the users of this platform will interpret these narratives and participate in this conversation. We chose to present this as an animation so we could take the users on the journey of the partner and relate to their lives. Following the same taxonomy, the hope was that the users can at least be fully aware of the situation and then do what they deem appropriate with it. It was important that the narrative could reveal the effect little things, like—giving ratings, giving the correct and detailed address, not cancelling appointments—could have on the life of the person on the receiving end. We were hoping that storytelling would evoke empathy and, in turn, action.

We have realized in our experience with designing storytelling outputs, the importance and the influence exerted by the decision of where the outputs will be published. The place of storytelling defines how the story will be told and who will read it. For example, the Graphic Law Library⁶ which we worked on was primarily published on Instagram and our website. This influenced its design—the shape of each individual post, the font size, the balance of visuals with words, the maximum of ten images per topic, and the language the posts were in. The posts were accessed largely by English-speaking users of Instagram, some of whom had no awareness of the content we were sharing and some who found it useful for their audiences which were not all on Instagram themselves. We made the square Instagram posts available as downloadable PDFs for the latter so that they could print these and share.

For FemLab, the storytelling outputs are shared on multiple platforms to reach different audiences. We wanted to particularly reach audiences which may not be used to reading a research paper. Therefore, these outputs are published on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to invite different groups into the research. Additionally, we see publishing these stories as an opportunity to subvert these channels to present stories and voices that may, in the normal course, never find a home on these platforms.

As Storytellers and Translators

In terms of our positionality, building stories as a collaborator with FemLab required being conscious that we were sometimes two steps removed from where the story emerged. We worked with inputs based on field research

6 <https://www.justiceadda.com/graphiclawlibrary>

by academics, who themselves were documenting and interpreting their own field experiences. In doing so, we were conscious that our work already had a few layers of translation. To ensure that it remained accurate, and representative of the voices we sought to share, we built the stories as iterative designs. Our designs were tentative in the sense that we provided our interpretation of the data but shared it back with the researcher who then shared it within their field site, to check if the work was useful, meaningful, and usable. Doing so, we hoped to build a reflexivity to our work, such that as storytellers, translators, and interpreters, we ensured that the agency of the story was co-produced and co-designed (Steen 2013).

While storytelling outputs like animations and infographics can be shared on platforms, these outputs also hold the potential to become tools for our stakeholders who hope to collectivize and organize themselves, to create support for one another. As much as the movement gains from support by outsiders, it can only sustain and grow when it has support from those in the same vein. Storytelling humanizes information and helps in communicating complex, entangled issues effectively (de Souza 2021c). For FemLab, we were conscious in ensuring how the stories we told became effective tools that could be shared on WhatsApp groups, as well as printouts that would facilitate in collectivizing the disparate voices of women workers in different sectors.

Therefore, in the different stories in the project, a dilemma we sometimes faced was how to ensure that the outputs built an interactive element. In this process, in addition to demystification of legal information, we were also interested in finding ways to build engagement. The toolkit and visual contracts were designed to address these twin motivations.⁷ At one level, they sought to de-jargonize the law by offering plain language and visual cues to break down complex patterns, while at another level, we introduced practical steps that a reader/user can employ to work through the document.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have reflected on our storytelling experiences and processes at FemLab and focused on what storytelling can achieve for a project that operates within a similar framework. When making a case

7 Our data toolkit is an example of using interactive activities to make understanding the lifecycle of data more accessible. Justice Adda, “The Not So Secret Life of Your Data.” For more, see <https://www.justiceadda.com/datarights>

for those on the margins, it takes more effort to make sure the voices are heard—when the stakeholders are many and issues complex, especially when what we are hoping to achieve is attention, support, care, and a change in status quo. Stories allow us to present the ignored narratives and new imaginaries convincingly, and represent realities contextually and holistically.

Across the different sectors of operation of FemLab, there is a collection of stories of resilience, protest, and strength. These stories are co-created into forms that are distributed on channels where they find new audiences, new contexts, and new representation. Storytelling invites them into this dialogue and makes them an active participant in the research by locating the story in relation to their lives. This is our hope in translating research into stories, because realizing you are a part of the story matters.

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15. Ethical Consumerism: Gig Economy's Road Ahead

Brinda Gupta

Abstract

This article brings to light the plight of the Indian gig workers in the ride-hailing economy who are termed as “partners” of the firm. It explains their distress of dwindling incomes, poor social security, and struggle of everyday survival once the pandemic hit the country. The focus shifts towards the labour reforms of 2020 and how it contributes to their upliftment. Areas of improvement, possible loopholes, and ways to enhance female driver participation have also been suggested. The chapter, lastly, talks about the role of stakeholders, especially consumers through ethical consumerism. It suggests providing optional higher surges and more personalization to them, while calling for greater coordination and awareness between stakeholders to improve the livelihood of these workers.

Keywords: gig workers, national lockdown, Social Security Code 2020, female driver participation, ethical consumerism

“PM Modi Announces 21-Day Lockdown as COVID-19 Toll Touches 12,” read the headlines of *The Hindu* on March 24, 2020 (Hebbar 2020).

Offices indefinitely closed, shops shut, and gatherings banned. People pushed into their homes, not knowing what will happen next. A mask, a sanitizer, and six-foot distance became the new normal. Drones captured images of roads that, once congested with traffic, were now empty. On the front, these empty roads portrayed a country fighting a catastrophe. But what remained unseen and unheard were the many in its backyard fighting another battle—a battle of survival. Amongst those who fought for their livelihood in a dwindling economy were India's more than eight million gig workers (Nanda 2021). Soon news emerged of workers going on strikes

and demanding relief from companies as they lost their earnings with the diminished demand during the national lockdown.

One might ask, who are these workers and what is their story?

Meet Digambar Bansal, a forty-year-old migrant, who migrated to Mumbai and joined Ola to benefit from improved financial prospects promised by these ride-hailing firms. Unemployment and past abysmal working conditions with meagre monthly incomes of INR 15,000 (\$200) contributed to his motivation, like for many others, to join the platform. In the early stages of these unicorns, he claimed to have earned INR 90,000 (\$1,200) a month in an interview with *Mumbai Mirror* (Ghosh and Gadgil 2018). This led him to purchase vehicles and auxiliaries through third-party credits in the hopes of an uplifted livelihood. This illusion, however, was short-lasting.

In recent years, his earnings have declined to INR 20,000–30,000 (\$270–400) per month. With an equated monthly instalment (EMI) of INR 10,000 (\$135) and fuel worth Rs 500 (\$6.75), along with car maintenance, Bansal faced difficulties in making ends meet. “Half of my income goes towards paying my EMI, and with what remains, I am torn between either providing for my family or spending on the car’s maintenance. We drivers are in a terrible state financially,” claimed another driver, Thorat, aged thirty-six, in the same interview with *Mumbai Mirror* (Ghosh and Gadgil 2018).

From Dreams to Debts

These stories of drivers like Bansal and Thorat are not exceptional but represent the experiences of numerous drivers engaged with these platforms. The entry of ride-hailing firms accelerated the growth of the gig economy—a labour market characterized by freelance work through contracts or platforms. These firms hired workers like Bansal in enormous numbers by creating a pseudo-formal sector based on volatile incentives and incomes. However, over the years, increased fuel costs, decreased rates per kilometre, and withdrawal of incentives have contributed to drivers’ financial attenuation (Gupta and Natarajan 2020). Yet, despite these setbacks, drivers have continued to work for the platform as they find themselves with principal repayments and increasing interests to pay for investments incurred on these false hopes. Unfortunately, the financial distress does not end here.

Drivers like Bansal are gig workers termed as “partners” of the firms who utilize the platform to connect with customers and provide services.

Hence, they are not considered company employees and are devoid of social security provisions like healthcare. Although firms have claimed to provide insurance, the on-ground reality speaks a different story. Nearly ninety-six per cent of respondents stated they had no form of insurance, in a November 2019 survey¹ carried out by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) in collaboration with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). It also noted that if drivers do have insurance, many were unaware of its possession or how to claim it. Furthermore, like Bansal, many drivers were married, thus bearing the responsibility of their families. After accounting for costs and basic needs, these drivers were left with little to invest in health and education—a dimension of their life to which they solely contribute. At a time when these drivers were already struggling to make ends meet, their financial despair was intensified with the sudden enforcement of the national lockdown in March 2020 as COVID-19 struck India.

The economy came to a standstill, and the demand for cabs dwindled. The IFAT and the ITF carried out four surveys² from March–June 2020, which recorded that the drivers' average weekly income commencing April 15 was less than INR 2,500 (\$33). The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had given a moratorium on principal repayments to be made by drivers against the loans taken for financing their vehicles in the early wake of COVID-19. The RBI then extended this moratorium until August 31. However, it did not waive off the interest payments, which was a huge amount to repay at a time when drivers were unable to undertake rides (Rakheja and Staff 2020). Similarly, funds set up by ride-hailing firms were limited to the cost of disease or necessary supplies and did not include finances like EMIs (Korreck 2020). At a time like this, many companies raised prices to recover costs. However, consumers in the cab aggregator company since its emergence have demanded low-cost cabs, not willing to bear higher prices to help these workers. This piling interest, thus, compelled drivers to work in a low-demand low-price economy, exposing themselves to the virus, despite lacking health insurance and sick leave. Many drivers feared getting infected, not because of deteriorating health concerns but because it meant missing out on weekly earnings to cover costs. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed that being sick is also a luxury not everyone can afford.

1 <https://cis-india.org/raw/files/ifat-itf-protecting-workers-in-digital-platform-economy-ola-uber-occupational-health-safety-report/>

2 <https://cis-india.org/raw/files/ifat-itf-protecting-workers-in-digital-platform-economy-ola-uber-occupational-health-safety-press-release>

Gendered Hope through Legal Reform

Amidst this upheaval came a ray of hope for these drivers as the government announced the Social Security Code 2020,³ the first law to recognize gig and platform workers formally. Under the code, the government aims to set up a social security fund for these workers. The aggregators have also been instructed to contribute one to two per cent of their annual turnover towards the fund. Moreover, the National Social Security Board will act for the gig workers and platform workers under this code, instead of only unorganized workers in the 2019 bill.

Although this initialization of labour laws depicts recognition of a long-ignored community, the sector's small community of women who have been further pushed back during the pandemic are yet to be recognized. The affliction runs deeper as one takes a bird's-eye view and notices the differentiated gender access to gig platforms. The primary reason behind the sector's low engagement of women is the initial investment in vehicles. A report by Aapti Institute, an organization that generates policy-relevant accessible knowledge to support the creation of a fair and equitable society, noted that women often relied on family savings for initial funding as opposed to third-party loans due to inaccessibility to lenders (Gupta and Natarajan 2020). Obstacles that further hinder their investment in vehicles are unplanned pregnancies and care of families, which halt the earnings required to cover interests and EMIs. Moreover, mechanisms for safety and protection against harassment when going to unknown locations to pick up customers have not been ensured.

It is vital that these labour laws provide resources to help women get back on their feet as they can no longer rely on family savings, which have been exhausted during the pandemic. Measures to boost their entry, like maternity leave and extension of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, should be carried out as security at the workplace is a right of every individual. Lastly, channels to ensure women can use the social security funds at their discretion need to be implemented.

For the larger community of gig workers, some aspects of the code require further work. A clearer distinction between gig and platform workers is required, as currently workers engaged in these platforms can be categorized as both. Moreover, to obtain the benefits, the central government requires workers' digital registration and regular update of details—a digital know-how many workers do not possess. It has also bifurcated social security

3 <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-code-on-social-security-2020>

measures for the centre and state, making the implementation difficult for the workers to understand. Most importantly, while the codes recognize the role of companies, it is yet to address the responsibility of consumers of these services to uplift the lives of gig workers. These drawbacks are impediments that need to be tackled to complement the government's mission to formalize the platform economy and make the new labour laws indispensable towards ensuring workers' social security.

From Consumers to Contributors

The gig economy is evolving. Governments are beginning to recognize its presence and provide adequate rights. However, these labour law initiatives are being financed by the government and companies through a fixed annual contribution. This contribution may not be enough to uplift the workers until the companies can themselves earn more and carry out a ripple down effect of increased revenue. It is hence imperative that we bring in a vital stakeholder of the gig economy in this debate—the demand-diving force of the economy, the consumers themselves. Consumers have long ridden on the competition-fuelled low-cost ride-hailing services. To sustain upliftment, a partial cost shift to consumers is required. However, they are not moral actors who will arbitrarily accept appreciated prices. Hence, incorporation of novel means by stakeholders to persuade consumers to annually increase the monetary social security contribution and witness long-term change is a must.

In general, consumers tend to humanize frontline employees and feel compassionate towards them (Kimeldorf et al. 2006). Hence, we suggest that ride-hailing firms should add a personal touch to their app by providing more than basic driver details, such as a short introduction, and their educational background. This may help in humanizing them to facilitate a better connection and serve as a priming effect to persuade consumers to contribute towards the upliftment of gig workers. For example, Zomato, under its Feed India initiative, automatically rounds off the bill with the balance amount going to its Feed India fund—an optional amount that consumers have the autonomy to remove. However, this mechanism provides a nudge to consumers to contribute rather than simply asking them if they wish to tip or not. Ride-hailing firms can incorporate a similar structure with the proceeds going to workers' social security. This is the first step towards monetary consumer contribution, an optional one—since no company in this era of market capitalization would risk permanently increasing cost

and losing market share. However, in the long run, upliftment can thrive only when the partial permanent cost is shifted towards consumers.

Further, consumers can play a vital role in encouraging women's participation not just through monetary contribution, but by providing safety through information. One implementation could be a mechanism that benefits both parties—consumers and women drivers. For example, in addition to the existing customer rating system on the apps, we call for systems that encourage consumers to provide additional information such as gender and age, to be made visible to female drivers only. This can allow women drivers to select if they wish to accept only a female as a customer, especially during odd or late hours, without depriving them of the opportunity to serve other customers as well. Moreover, the mechanism can include an option of enabling customers to make the destination area visible to these drivers to make them feel safer. The rationale behind this recommendation is that female drivers can be made aware of the distance and the location they will have to travel to and then back, alone.

In exchange, it should let female customers who give this information see the availability of female cab drivers nearby and increase the radius of search as well. Also, permitting both parties to contact each other can play an instrumental role. In an article by *IndiaSpend*, Pooja—a gig worker utilizing the platform of Urban Company—claimed that they often communicate with the person who booked the appointment for confirmation (Raman and Saif 2021). Hence, if they feel safe rendering services only to a female, or in the presence of one, they can ensure that. Similarly, female drivers and customers both, through such contact, will be able to communicate, confirm, and overcome their reservations. Along the lines of the suggestions for monetary contributions given above, the enabling of these options by the customers shall be voluntary. Hence, this mechanism through the integration of the initiative “cab for women by women” in the primary platform provides a two-fold benefit—encouraging safety of both parties, while enabling them to seize existing benefits of the platform.

Therefore, if we are to call for improved lives of workers, it is important to increase awareness about the role of ethical consumerism. Back in 2005 in New York City, in a major retail store, demand rose for items labelled as being made under good labour working conditions with prices increasing by ten to twenty per cent against the unlabelled goods (Hiscox and Smyth 2008). This example, to say, lays a foundation to strengthen the argument of how consumers may be inclined towards companies with better labour conditions. Through steps like increasing prices, enabling priming effect, and encouraging consumers for data-sharing for inclusion of female workers in

the male-dominated gig economy, we have to leverage the consumer-buying behaviour to uplift the lives of workers. However, the above measures cannot be implemented unless other stakeholders encourage consumers to demand better worker rights. This requires changing consumers' positive view of the living conditions of gig workers in the cab-aggregator economy.

What Role Do Stakeholders Have to Burst this Bubble?

Research suggests that consumers' positive attitude towards gig labour can be due to make-believe worker-consumer interaction imperative to maintain favourable ratings, thus obscuring consumers' view of workers' experience (Healy et al. 2020). This holds importance as a consumer's perception of working conditions affects their intention to both use and recommend a service (Belanche et al. 2021). Moreover, research notes that ethical labour practices often can command a greater monetary consideration from consumers in markets. Hence, it is essential that organizations and trade unions aim to voice stories of these workers to create consumer awareness and elicit an empathetic consumer response. They should also compel companies, and if required, devise ways of appreciating prices that are acceptable to the consumer, one such being charging a premium by promoting investment in labour practices as the reason behind the price appreciation.

Coordination between trade unions and governments is the need of the hour. While the government formulates necessary steps that should be taken to improve the lives of the workers, it is the trade unions' responsibility to ensure that their suggestions are executed. The government can also put in place a system that guarantees proceeds from the implementation of phased dispersal of the responsibility on consumers—i.e., through higher pricing to provide workers with fair amounts—that go towards the upliftment of workers only. Lastly, it is the aggregators, who have to create mediums, such as through the integration of mechanisms on the app, that enable them to charge consumers for improving the lives of their platform workers. For example, a study suggests that women and educated people are particularly socially conscious (Belanche et al. 2021). Hence, on similar lines, there can be segments which can be relevant to socially conscious groups of the ride-hailing sector. These companies should focus on recognizing those segments and benefit from them by providing options of higher tips and optional higher surges.

It is time to deploy a sustainable long-term solution to uplift the lives of workers like Thorat and Bansal by recognizing the role of such pressure

groups, especially consumers, in influencing businesses. One such example is when Mattel confirmed that it will halt production of its SeaWorld Trainer Barbie after a backlash from animal rights activists against the aquatic parks with regard to concerns of poor treatment and safety. Similarly, Pepsi announcing that it will stop using aspartame as a sweetener in Diet Pepsi and other products due to consumer influence and requests to ditch the artificial sweetener, is another instance amongst many, whereby consumers affected the way businesses operate (Kane 2015). Hence, on this road ahead, ethical consumerism would be the turning point to help gig workers overcome the hurdles of this pseudo-formal economy and go the next mile.

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16. Converging Forces: Navigating Climate Change and the Future of Work in Developing Countries

Jamil Wyne

Abstract

Climate change and the Future of Work are inextricably linked, and their collective force will lead to new challenges and opportunities in developing countries, which will bear the brunt of the fallout of climate change. The more pronounced climate change impact is on developing countries, the more difficult, yet also more critical, it is for them to have productive labour markets and equitable economic growth, especially for vulnerable populations. For example, female populations across developing countries are often faced with fewer economic opportunities than men, and many who do have jobs work in industries that are highly susceptible to climate change. The forces of climate change and the Future of Work must be treated as part and parcel of any national development strategy. In doing so, developing countries can build environmental as well as socio-economic resiliency, as well as navigate climate change's unprecedented challenges while ensuring continued growth.

Keywords: climate change, low carbon technologies, climate-tech, future of work

Introduction

Climate change and the Future of Work (FoW) are inextricably linked, and their collective force will lead to new challenges and opportunities in developing countries. A mixture of exposure to extreme weather, geographic positioning in coastal areas, reliance on agriculture, pre-existing

development challenges, and a lack of economic resilience are creating what may be a recipe for disaster in many low-income economies (Wijaya 2014; Ludwig et al. 2007). The impact could be particularly dire for marginalized and vulnerable populations, including women in developing countries, who have historically had far fewer economic opportunities than their male counterparts and are arguably more exposed to climate-induced shocks and damage.

In parallel to mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change, developing countries must still pursue economic growth that helps them maintain pace and position within the global economy (Reddy and Assenza 2009). As developing countries contend with climate change, they must also ensure that they continue to integrate into an evolving global economy that demands new skills and embraces new technologies. The advent of low carbon technologies (LCTs) could help in navigating this equation—e.g., new technologies could lead to employment and wealth creation, while also helping to address climate change's growing effects. However, ensuring the proper infrastructure and skills needed to leverage LCTs, as well as successfully procure them in general, are not small orders, particularly when factoring in the need for protecting those most vulnerable in developing countries.

Understanding how climate change interacts with the Future of Work (FoW) in developing countries is part and parcel of this narrative. They cannot address this in isolation, yet doing so can lead to important opportunities for developing countries to more effectively unify climate and labour trends in policy decision processes, prioritize cost-effective and targeted technology development and transfer, hone climate-resilient skills in education and vocational training programmes, as well as generally strengthen alliances across public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Impact of Climate Change on Developing Countries

Climate change poses a massive threat to developing countries—both because of their geographies and their low-income status; meaning that developing countries face greater threats due to climate change, but have fewer financial resources to address those threats. The below data points provide a succinct summary of how climate change is expected to affect developing countries: approximately ninety-nine per cent of deaths due to climate change occur in the developing world (Dar 2012); natural disasters cost about \$18 billion a year in low- and middle-income countries through

damage to power generation and transport infrastructure alone (Hallegatte, Rentschler and Rozenberg 2019); and eighty per cent of countries most affected by extreme weather events were low-to-middle income countries (Eckstein, Künzel and Schäfer, 2021).

Examples of how these trends play out are abundant. For instance, altering precipitation patterns trigger heat waves, cause sea levels to rise, and increase the salinization of land. Health, nutrition, housing, transportation, and jobs are all threatened in this scenario. Similarly, in 2015, tropical storm Erika caused \$400 million in damage to Dominica—equal to ninety per cent of the small island state's GDP.¹ Trade and general commerce are also highly vulnerable in this equation. For example, major commercial ports in Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, Guangzhou, and Dar es Salaam are at risk of being submerged by rising sea levels.² Even a minor disruption in economic activity can have significant negative impacts, while prolonged interruptions can lead to extended and even permanent employment loss.

The impact can also be seen through adopting a gender lens. For instance, while developing countries will experience disproportionately high fallout from climate change, women in these countries are in a particularly vulnerable position. The bulk of the world's poor are female, meaning that negative shocks due to climate change can have an acute effect on their already economically marginalized lives.³ Additionally, women are often more dependent on the procurement of natural resources for sustaining their livelihoods, particularly in rural areas. As more natural forests and water sources, among others, come under threat due to shifting climate patterns, female populations are increasingly at risk (Ibid.). With this added lens, climate change's full effects not only threaten to disrupt and even halt economic growth in developing countries, but they will also have a direct, profound impact on women's inclusion. Thus, the direct impact that climate change has on labour markets and livelihoods in developing countries is real and can be increasingly severe.

1 Kambon et al. The Commonwealth of Dominica, Social and Livelihood Assessment, Following Tropical Storm Erika. Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica with the Technical Assistance of the UNDP, Barbados and the OECS, 2019. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNDP-RBLAC-TropicalStormErikaBB_o.pdf

2 Climate Change and the Developing World: A Disproportionate Impact. March 2021. US Global Leadership Council. <https://www.usglc.org/media/2021/03/USGLC-Fact-Sheet-Climate-Change.pdf>

3 Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change – Fact Sheet. United Nations, 2009 https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf

FoW in Developing Countries

Climate change aside, developing countries were already beset by the tall order of adapting to other dominant global trends. New technological advances are necessitating fast and vast upskilling, and are essentially a prerequisite for taking part in the global economy. This parallel narrative, often referred to as the Future of Work (FoW), is another phenomenon that developing countries have been, and will continue to contend with, as they seek to provide meaningful employment and equitable economies for their people. Women and youth are in a particularly precarious situation, given the lingering barriers that they face to economic inclusion. Understanding how the most salient FoW trends are playing out in developing countries is critical to the larger conversation regarding climate change in these nations as well.

It may be becoming trite, but globally, there is a rapid technological transformation occurring that has profound effects on how people work, learn, and build their livelihoods. For example, McKinsey estimates that as new technologies and working methods become ingrained in employers globally, upwards of 160 million women may need to make career transitions by 2030.⁴ As they come to terms with the sweeping effects that the FoW will bring, governments as well are finding these trends embedded in policy discussions and decisions. Generally speaking, this trend is catalyzed by innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), blockchains, and big data. Collectively, these technologies and methodologies serve as the connective tissue in what many call the Future of Work. Indeed, unprecedented efficiencies and wealth are natural byproducts of these fast-moving trends, yet not all countries are equally capable of absorbing them in the near-term, and many developing nations in particular lack the resources needed to adequately respond to and create the policy frameworks for adoption.

Lingering labour challenges in developing countries predate the concerns surrounding the FoW. While estimates vary, 600 million jobs at least need to be created by 2030 to absorb the number of youth projected to enter the market.⁵ Moreover, there will be 1.3 billion youth worldwide by 2050,

4 Madgavkar et al. *The Future of Women at Work: Transitions in the Age of Automation*. McKinsey Global Institute, 2019. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-future-of-women-at-work-transitions-in-the-age-of-automation>

5 *World Youth Report: Youth Social Entrepreneurship and the 2030 Agenda*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2020/07/2020-World-Youth-Report-FULL-FINAL.pdf>

many of whom will be in developing countries (Chandy 2017). Much of this population will not reach tertiary education, and even those that do will have to contend with long traditions of educational systems not matching with current labour market demands. This mismatch will be compounded by the aforementioned technological evolutions, which will expedite the development of industries, requiring new skill sets that must be acquired in short order. Moreover, these forces are converging when safeguarding good jobs, and general economic inclusion for women in developing countries is a longstanding imperative. Women's labour force participation is significantly lower than men's in most countries around the world, often earning and working far less.⁶

As FoW forces become more prevalent in developing countries, there is potential disruption on already perilous labour market conditions for women. Put differently, developing countries have historically faced large unemployment challenges, with their education systems unable to effectively absorb growing populations, and in turn, produce employable workers. Major trends in the FoW will likely magnify these deficiencies.

At the moment, developing countries are unprepared to adapt to automation, due to low wage levels, limited availability of workers with highly technical skills, high technology costs, and regulatory barriers. These technological advances will disproportionately reward highly skilled workers and owners of capital (Chandy 2017). Technology will have an outsized role to play in the FoW, with large implications for education and technical skills learning in developing countries.

Climate Change and the FoW in Developing Countries

Climate change is forcing both developed and developing countries to examine the impact of the natural environment and weather patterns on every facet of the economy. While each country will need to procure a solution set that is tailored to its unique socio-economic climate, consensus is building around four main ways in which climate change will impact the future of work in developing countries.

Resource depletion: One major way climate change will disrupt the FoW in developing countries is through the depletion of resources that serve

6 World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2018 – Global Snapshot. International Labor Organization, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/trends-for-women2018/WCMS_619577/lang-en/index.htm

as inputs in the economy. Climate change is causing soil degradation, the destruction of coral and marine ecosystems, and pollution and worsened air, soil, and water quality. The destruction or damage of these inputs may result in the destruction of certain industries, or might lead to the increased cost of inputs due to scarcity. On net, the 1.2 billion jobs globally that depend on the natural environment, are at risk (Montt, Fraga and Harsdorff 2018).

Extreme weather events: Climate change is making extreme weather events more common, and as these events damage infrastructure and create more hazardous living and working conditions, they will naturally have a negative fallout on labour markets. For example, 2020's cyclone Amphan caused \$13 billion in damage in India.⁷ Beyond the destruction of infrastructure, severe weather can also influence the ability of workers to perform their jobs. By 2030, the total number of hours lost to rising temperatures will increase to two per cent, equivalent to 72 million full-time jobs (Ibid.). As climate change becomes an increasingly present force, agriculture and food sectors will face crises, creating vast uncertainty and potential disaster for many developing countries. Damage due to extreme weather can also be viewed from a sectoral lens. For instance, the tourism sector, an important source of revenue for many developing countries, is at high risk due to extreme weather events. Flooding and droughts may render many formerly frequently visited locations damaged or inaccessible. Many women also rely on tourism for jobs in developing countries—roughly forty-six per cent of the tourism workforce, globally, are women—meaning that as activity is curtailed in this sector, both the sector and women working within it will be at risk.⁸

Health and safety of workers: Additionally, climate change will also have an impact on the health and safety of workers—both due to losses in productivity, as well as work-related health risks. The decrease in air quality will impact workers as low-quality air will cause increased incidences of health problems (Ibid.). This can cause lower productivity and lost hours, both from workers who are themselves impacted, as well as the increased need for healthcare labour when relatives or friends become ill, a responsibility which disproportionately belongs to women. In addition, climate change will lead to more work-related injuries and illnesses. In particular, rising temperatures will increase the incidence of heat stroke, as well as the amount of time workers will need to rest to avoid heat stroke or exhaustion (Ibid.).

7 “CDC Emerging Economy Climate Report 2021,” CDC. <https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/news-insight/insight/articles/cdc-emerging-economies-climate-report-2021/>

8 Green Jobs: Improving the Climate for Gender Equality Too! International Labour Organization. Bureau for Gender Equality; International Labour Office. Policy Integration Department.

Pressures on the agriculture sector: According to the World Bank, approximately 1 billion people work in agriculture globally, representing twenty-eight per cent of the population employed; however, the percentage of people employed in agriculture has been trending downward. For instance, in 1991, forty-four per cent of global employment was in agriculture.⁹ In developing countries, many farmers rely on rain-fed agriculture, forests to prevent floods, fertile soil, the pollination of crops, and the control of agricultural pests. Similarly, coastal fishing relies on the biodiversity and ocean's ability to renew fish stocks, as well as tidal marshes, mangroves, and coastal reefs for storm protection. As climate change causes changes in rainfall patterns, droughts, soil degradation/erosion, salinization of arable land, sea levels, and ocean temperatures, the agriculture and food sectors will face crises—as yields may decrease and techniques for food cultivation may no longer be suitable. Here again, women stand to be disproportionately impacted by climate-induced damage to agriculture sectors. Women tend to play a greater role than men in farming and planting, demonstrating women's heavy reliance on agriculture for their livelihoods in developing countries. Yet, women also tend to have lower levels of access to important agricultural inputs, including land and credit.¹⁰ As maintaining farms, forests, and other sources of natural resources becomes more and more untenable, women will acutely feel the brunt (Ibid.).

Climate change will have a profound impact on labour markets. Moreover, climate change will directly determine the FoW as well, as no industry, job, or skill set will be left untouched by increasingly changing climate and environmental conditions. Thus, policy agendas will need to acknowledge the linkage between the two. Much like how technology is driving the FoW, it is also critical in climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Innovations in renewable energy, carbon sequestration, natural capital monitoring, and weather forecasting, among many others, are becoming increasingly mainstreamed. These LCTs are part and parcel of any country's climate change agenda as well. New technologies that support in mitigating as well as adapting to climate change's effects can also open new employment opportunities. In doing so, LCTs can help in providing potential “win-win”

9 World Bank data, retrieved on August 29, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>

10 Green Jobs: Improving the Climate for Gender Equality Too! International Labour Organization. Bureau for Gender Equality; International Labour Office. Policy Integration Department. Geneva: ILO; 2009. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_101505.pdf

scenarios for countries, as they are forced to navigate climate and labour-related challenges. That said, the degree to which these technologies can be a legitimate lynchpin to boost labour markets, including helping to maintain and enhance economic inclusion of vulnerable populations, is still up for grabs.

Low Carbon Technologies—A Force for Climate Mitigation/Adaptation and Job Creation?

LCTs could create millions of jobs worldwide. Currently, the costs of LCTs are decreasing.¹¹ For example, between 2010 and 2018, solar energy's cost per gigawatt fell by eighty per cent, followed by fifty-four per cent for energy storage, and twenty-two per cent for onshore wind power.¹² The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicts that the energy transition will create 24 million jobs globally and destroy 6 million jobs, creating a net of 18 million jobs added (Montt, Fraga and Harsdorff 2018). However, ensuring that LCTs are legitimate job creators in developing countries will require addressing some sobering realities.

For starters, job loss could be a natural byproduct of introducing LCTs, when workers in outdated industries and those that are more susceptible to automation, attempt to transition to jobs for which they are not properly skilled. However, this will not be the norm across countries and industries. Much of the factories and machinery required to produce LCTs are complex and require engineers and other specialized skill sets (Bulmer and Rutkowski 2021). Advanced skills in LCT-specific domains will likely require formal education. Globally, only thirty-eight per cent of people receive a tertiary education, with that number dropping to nine per cent in Africa.¹³ While LCTs are by no means a staple in either developed or developing countries, the need for advanced skill sets, against the backdrop of labour and educational challenges across developing countries writ large, is bound to hit a snag. As such, there is a real risk that LCT-driven job creation will not align with the pre-existing or readily learned skills of displaced workers in developing

11 Lorenczik, Stefan and Keppler, Jan Horst, *Projected Costs of Generating Electricity 2020 Edition*. International Energy Agency and Nuclear Energy Agency, 2020. <https://www.iea.org/reports/projected-costs-of-generating-electricity-2020>

12 CDC Emerging Economies Climate Report 2021. <https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/news-insight/insight/articles/cdc-emerging-economies-climate-report-2021/>

13 Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank, 2020. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/764421611934520379-0090022021/original/OneAfricaTEandCovidupdated.pdf>

countries, impeding the potential of LCTs to create local jobs for the average worker.

While indeed the costs of LCTs are lowering and becoming competitive with traditional fossil fuel-powered incumbents, there are still high upfront capital requirements for acquiring and implementing them.¹⁴ In fact, the bulk of LCTs are built in high-income countries, and never make their way into low income ones (Pigato 2020) (Ibid.). For instance, for India to reach net zero by 2050, there is an estimated price tag of \$1.4–1.9 trillion, roughly half of India's current GDP (Kenny 2021). Of course, this cost consists of many line items, and LCT only constitutes a portion of it.¹⁵ Yet, the gaps in global climate finance are still vast, to the tune of several trillion, according to some estimates, annually.¹⁶

Compounding the high cost of LCTs are the global financing gaps in climate finance. Although the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments are upping their climate finance commitments, the funding needs are still astronomical.¹⁷ To limit global warming to 1.5°C, by 2030, annual climate finance must increase by 588 per cent to \$4.35 trillion.¹⁸ Developing countries face acute financing gaps, both in bilateral assistance, as well as through the insufficient flow of private capital, as total climate finance spending is split between public and private actors.

Recommendations

Governments in developing countries must make challenging decisions in balancing immediate gains for citizen well-being versus combatting the

14 Pigato, Miria; Black, Simon J.; Dussaux, Damien; Mao, Zhimin; McKenna, Miles; Rafaty, Ryan; Touboul, Simon. 2020. Technology Transfer and Innovation for Low-Carbon Development. International Development in Focus, Washington, D.C.: World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33474> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.

15 "CDC Emerging Economy Climate Report 2021," CDC. <https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/news-insight/insight/articles/cdc-emerging-economies-climate-report-2021/>

16 Buchner, Barbara, et al. Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2021. Climate Policy Initiative, 2021. <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/global-landscape-of-climate-finance-2021/>

17 COP26 Presidency Compilation of 2021–2025 Climate Finance Commitments. UK Government and UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021, 2021. <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/finance/>

18 Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2021. Climate Policy Initiative, 2021. <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/global-landscape-of-climate-finance-2021/#:~:text=The%202021%20edition%20of%20Climate,out%20annual%20fluctuations%20in%20data>

long-term threat of climate change, particularly when taking into account the needs of the most vulnerable. While each country's precise experience with these challenges will vary, the below action areas can help in focusing efforts.

Action Area 1: Establish the understanding that labour is embedded in the larger conversation of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Climate change will need to be seen as not just an environmental challenge—but also a labour issue. This means that the popular understanding must shift to reconceptualize climate change as a multi-sectoral issue that requires key actors to work across silos. Policymakers should consider where and how climate change needs to be integrated into existing policy/programming frameworks surrounding education, small and medium enterprises, healthcare, etc. In doing so, climate change must be mainstreamed into the core objectives and activities of these policies/programmes rather than as an addendum to projects.

Action Area 2: Developing countries need to prioritize cost-effective and targeted tech transfer. Many national governments may be enticed by the prospect of acquiring the latest technological advances, which often come at a high cost. Because of the financing gaps in climate finance, tech acquisition and tech transfer should be targeted towards technology that is affordable and easily scalable to maximize the impact of limited finance.

Action Area 3: Prioritize climate-resilient skills development in education and vocational training programmes. In order to prepare the workforce for climate change and its economic implications, developing countries need to place climate-resilient skills and knowledge at the forefront of their pedagogy and curricula in schools and vocational training centres—both public and private. Using climate as the guiding principle for upskilling the current workforce and priming the future workforce will allow developing countries to cultivate the human capital needed to facilitate LCT transfer and respond to climate change.

Action Area 4: Build strong alliances across public, private, and non-profit sectors. Given that both climate change, as well as labour markets and the FoW are relevant across industries, policymakers need to build relationships with stakeholders across industries as well. This is especially salient because of the key role of the private sector in climate change adaptation and mitigation. In doing so, policymakers will need to gain buy-in of industry leaders and understand how the mixture of climate and labour-related challenges and opportunities affects their domain.

Action Area 5: Address the needs of the most vulnerable populations, including women and youth. Marginalized demographics in developing countries risk being left even further behind, as the full effects of climate

change and the FoW take root. For instance, climate change is set to magnify historical gender inequities globally. Developing countries, home to long-standing economic marginalization of large percentages of their female and youth populations, could see these gaps widen as industries evolve and are disrupted, by changes in climate and the FoW. Thus, these groups will require tailored support in navigating these forces.

Conclusion

Climate change and the FoW are inextricably linked, and these twin forces cannot be considered in isolation from one another. The more pronounced climate change's impact is on developing countries, the more difficult, yet also more critical it is for them to have productive labour markets and, overall, equitable economic growth. Despite the current warning signs and sobering forecasts, it is not uncommon for climate change to be positioned as an opportunity for developing countries (Tsitsiragos 2016). Moreover, considering the labour dimension within the larger climate agenda can help policymakers in identifying these opportunities. Unifying climate and labour policies and funding programmes, optimizing the usage of LCTs, and building the skills necessary to create and maintain them as well as enhancing coordination between sectors, are all steps that developing countries can take to build both environmental and socio-economic resiliency, help to navigate climate change's unprecedented challenges, and ensure continued growth.

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17. Challenging Capitalist Patriarchy and Negotiating for Women Worker Rights: Exploring the “Right to Sit” Movement in Kerala

Anila Backer

Abstract

The chapter explores the Right to Sit movement in Kerala, through which women workers in the garment sector fought for their right to sit with the support of a women's labour collective and a trade union. This struggle (right to sit) continued even after bringing in policy-level changes for its effective implementation in the commercial establishments. This chapter looks at how the movement that fought for a fundamental human right stood against capitalist patriarchy and, in turn, gendered precarity, and negotiated for the rights of women workers. It also looks at the role of digital technology and social media in the mobilization, organization, and sustenance of the movement.

Keywords: Right to sit, capitalist patriarchy, women worker rights, digital collective action, gendered precarity

Introduction

Recruited as a sales worker in Sangeeth Cottons, a major textile shop in Kozhikode city in Kerala, Latha was deployed in the shop's warehouse a month after starting the job. She and a few other women workers had to carry cloth bundles to the warehouse, separate them, and cut them into pieces. She and three other women, her co-workers, reached the “Penkoottu”¹

¹ “Penkoottu” (women for each other) is a women's collective in Kozhikode, Kerala, that works for the unorganized sector workers.

women's collective office in Kozhikode one day when they were expelled from their job for asking for masks to protect them from the dust of the cloth materials. They reached the organization's office to share their sufferings at the workplace, particularly the restrictions to sit while working at the textile showroom and even at the warehouse.

Latha was narrating her experiences and exploitations they suffered at the workplace to us:

One day, when I was sitting on the floor of the warehouse and cutting the cloth materials, another staff of the shop came running to me and asked me to stand up. She pointed out that the manager spotted me working by sitting through the closed-circuit camera and entrusted her to ask me to stand and do the work (Personal interview).

This was five years post the beginning of the "Right to Sit" movement (Irikkal Samaram) by "Penkoottu" and its trade union, AMTU (Asanghatitha Meghala Thozhilali Union – Unorganised Sector Workers Union), and more than a year after the amendment of the Shops and Commercial Establishments Act by Kerala government in 2018, making it mandatory to provide seating arrangements in commercial establishments. Besides, this is not the sole narrative of Latha or her co-workers. I have been part of the movement after the implementation of the law in Kerala as part of my fieldwork² and have been listening to similar experiences of women who reach the women's collective office to share their woes. We have also paid visits to several textile shops in the city and witnessed this situation first-hand.

This human rights violation prevented workers from sitting at the workplace, particularly in the textile sector where women form the primary workforce, came into public through the movement spearheaded by the collective and their trade union in 2014. The saleswomen in the textile sector had to assume the role of mannequins, being commodified, displaying the dress materials and catering to customers' needs by standing during their entire work time. The movement began with a one-month door-to-door campaign in shops in SM Street in Kozhikode against the violation of the

2 The research explores the communication practices and processes of the women's labour movement organization, "Penkoottu" and AMTU in Kerala. It focuses on how the movement negotiates with the understanding of what it means to be a woman and a woman worker, striving for their rights through collective actions, and individual struggles of the movement members.

right. It was followed by a sit-in and a rally on International Labour Day on May 1, 2014, in SM street,³ where activists and workers belonging to the collective and its trade union carried chairs on their heads protesting the unwritten law in the textile sector, preventing workers from sitting at the workplace. This was followed by several other protests across the state and led to the implementation of a law by the state government assuring the right. The protest at Kalyan Sarees, Thrissur, a major textile chain in the state, against the transfer of six women workers for joining the trade union, AMTU, which continued for more than 100 days, was one of the prominent protests in the movement that gained public and government attention.

Despite the amendment of the Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, making workers' right to sit a legal assurance, it is not a practice in most of the shops. "Penkoottu" and AMTU are still striving to make it a norm, making the "Right to Sit" an ongoing movement. For instance, a protest was held at Kozhikode district labour office after hearing the experiences of Latha and her co-workers, rising against the violation of the right and the law in several textile shops in the city. This led to a series of inspections of shops in the city by the labour officers.

This chapter explores the movement where women workers had to fight for a fundamental right—to sit—and continue with the struggle to attain the right even after bringing in policy-level changes. It looks at how the movement that fought for a fundamental human right stood against capitalist patriarchy and negotiated for the rights of women workers. It also looks at the role of digital technology and social media in the mobilization, organization, and sustenance of the movement.

"Right to Sit"—A Movement against Capitalist Patriarchy?

An excerpt from a pamphlet titled, "Why the textile workers are protesting for the right to sit," distributed among the workers and shopkeepers in Kozhikode by the trade union during a campaign in the beginning of the Right to Sit movement in 2014, states:

Women who form the primary workforce in the textile sector are the most exploited ones as well. Women are being recruited on a large scale

3 SM street (Sweet Meat Street) is a historical and popular shopping street in Kozhikode, Kerala. It is also known as Mitayitheruvu.

in the sector, considering the low wages to be paid to them, expecting that they will not raise voices and use them as ‘beauty elements.’ They are paid very less than men, and there is nothing like equal pay for equal work in the industry. They are not allowed to sit at the workplace and have to stand and work for long hours even while having physical difficulties such as during menstruation. Besides, their long working day starts even before reaching the workplace doing the domestic chores at home and continues till midnight after reaching the home. Moreover, their job market is so insecure and unjust that they lose the job if they are pregnant.

As is clear from the pamphlet’s content, apart from interpreting the issue as a human rights violation, the movement questions the capitalist patriarchy that constitutes the oppression of women both from their gender and class positions, which are manifested through the material and ideological dimensions of patriarchy and capitalism (Eisenstein 1979). Of course, preventing women from sitting at the workplace has more dimensions than that of a basic rights violation. Apart from capitalist connotations that treat workers as commodities, it also has patriarchal underpinnings. Sitting symbolizes power in a patriarchal society, where women are treated among the inferior gender categories. Its negation reflects the hierarchical sexual ordering in society that tries to reinforce patriarchal structuring through such acts.

Like in the content of the pamphlet, the movement talks about the double oppression women workers face and the commodification of their work. Though it may be considered unusual that they need to fight by protesting and campaigning to win a basic human right, the movement was more than that, exploring and questioning the economic exploitation and social oppression women face in capitalist patriarchy. Talking about women’s dual labour at home and the workplace and the lesser value attached to their labour—both economically and socially—the movement addressed the sexual division of labour and society that is evident in the capitalist economy.

“Is there any law that states that workers can sit at the workplace, is what the labour officers asked when a meeting was convened on behalf of the labour commission when we protested for the right to sit in 2014,” Viji P, popularly known as Viji Penkoottu, the founder and secretary of “Penkoottu” and AMTU told me as she spoke about the movement. “We responded to it, asking them if there is any law that prohibits us from sitting,” she continued.

This was the nature of the authorities' response when the movement raised the issue for the first time, and it was the continuous struggle of "Penkoottu" that led to the implementation of the law. Says Viji,

Meanwhile, employers were of the attitude that they are doing enough for these women who are otherwise 'simply sitting at home.' They, as well as the mainstream trade unions, were referring to women workers as those who are sitting idle at home or coming to pass their leisure time.

This account is similar to what Maria Mies (2012) talks about in her work on women lace workers in Narsapur. She says that the manufacturers and local officials considered women as sitting in the house and engaged in crocheting to pass their leisure time, thereby devaluing their labour. She says that the maintenance and propagation of the housewife ideology structured in the sexual division of labour and society lead to the extreme exploitation of women. Making women workers and their work invisible is a feature of capitalist patriarchy that considers women inferior in the sexual hierarchy and treats them as commodities. The feminization of labour incorporated an unprecedented number of women into the labour force with paid jobs, challenging the previous notion of women as mainly devoted to domestic and care work. They were regarded as a cheap labour pool, and their jobs were more precarious (Garrido 2020). The movement questions this gendered precarity and feminization of labour, and resists capitalist patriarchy aiming to ensure secure, valued, and respectful labour for women and to safeguard their rights.

Mayadevi, who was part of the movement at Kalyan Sarees in Thrissur in 2014–15, points out:

It was like an unwritten rule that saleswomen should do their work standing. The men in the sales section will go to the basement and warehouse to unpack new cloth bundles and sit there comfortably. There was nothing like seats or chairs for us to sit at the shop and tired by standing, we used to sit at the toilet steps where there is no camera to watch us when we go to the toilets or during the lunch break. We have been thinking about the exploitations we face at the workplace, especially the gender-based wage gap and the prospects of unionising to fight for our rights and joined AMTU when we heard about the right to sit movement happening in Kozhikode.

She and five other saleswomen started a sit-in protest in front of the textile showroom in December 2014 when they were transferred to a different showroom for joining the trade union, AMTU. The protest

raised several issues in the textile sector, including not being allowed to sit, meagre wages, gender-based wage gaps, long working hours without a break, and imposing fines for talking and taking toilet breaks beyond the specified number. Citing the transferring of the women workers, the movement also questioned why women workers are exclusively targeted for unionizing and standing up for their rights, thereby asking why the precarity in the labour market has a significant impact on women's lives (Standing 1999).

Digital Support in the Mobilization, Organization, and Sustenance of the Movement

Social media played an extensive role in the propagation of these ideas and facilitated offline activism, especially since the protest at Kalyan Sarees, which marked the second phase of the movement. The immense social media support of the Kalyan Sarees protest made it a “connective-collective action” (Bennet and Segerberg 2012) or a social media-driven collective action. The movement itself has been using digital technologies for its mobilization and organization, especially for internal coordination. This raises the importance of looking into the role of digital technology in the movement organization.

Let me quote an instance from my field notes to explain how vital the instant messaging service platforms were for the internal coordination of the movement:

From morning onwards, there was this mood of protest and conflict in the air on November 6, 2019. We were planning to protest at the district labour office in Kozhikode against the violation of the right to sit following workers' complaints in several textiles, including that of Latha and her co-workers from Sangeeth Cottons. Viji Penkoottu sent a voice message in the WhatsApp group of 'Penkoottu' in the morning itself reminding everyone that the trade union is meeting the Kozhikode district labour officer at 11 am at his office to raise issues in the textile sector including the violation of the right to sit and other basic rights including to use toilets. She urged all the members to join the protest and said that slogans would be raised against the labour officer (enforcement) for failing to implement the Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, which was amended last year.

This was the nature of every protest and campaign of the organization. Conversations mainly in the form of voice messages would flood in the WhatsApp group to ensure participation.

WhatsApp has been the backbone of the internal communication dynamics of the movement and a mobilization strategy amongst its members ever since the movement organization started its WhatsApp groups. The group resembles a sound cloud full of voice notes of the members, discussing and arguing as if in a real meeting room. This is where they get information regarding the decisions taken at meetings in the organization office or about an upcoming or ongoing campaign or protest. This backstage activism or the internal communication that happens backstage of social media (Treré 2015) plays a significant role in the organization, mobilization, and the sustenance of the movement.

Apart from this backstage digital activism, the organization with its social media presence, i.e., with the Facebook pages of “Penkoottu” and AMTU Kerala, though not that active, have been carrying out campaigns at all the stages of the movement to mobilize public support. Besides, the activists who were part of the movement, in the beginning, had compiled the pamphlets and newsletters of the movement in a blog titled, “Asamghatitham” (Unorganized) to further propagate the ideas. The movement, which has thus employed digital technology in its collective action repertoire (Tilly 1993) from its start, is now exploring more social media features such as Facebook Live in recently held campaigns and protests.

The movement gained immense public and political attention when the mainstream media neglected the protest at Kalyan Sarees and when people on social media started campaigning for it. Social media thus aided the movement in sustaining it and in bringing in policy-level changes. With the enhanced speed, flexibility, and horizontal networking logic that connects people with a shared interest (Juris 2005), these online campaigns mobilized many people for the movement who, apart from supporting it through the medium, also reached protest sites to express solidarity. Social media was critiquing mainstream media for being silent despite the movement presenting the inhumane and precarious working conditions at textile showrooms through the case of Kalyan Sarees. They trolled the media’s business mentality, accusing them of neglecting the movement due to advertisement revenues. “Boycott Kalyan” was trending on Facebook at the time. This massive support led to the textile management taking back the protesting workers and agreeing to their demands.

Concluding Remarks

Viji Penkoottu said during a Facebook Live at Sangeeth Cottons, a textile showroom in Kozhikode:

Women in the unorganized sector are treated as enslaved people. There is no value for their labour, and they are not even paid the minimum wages. They are not allowed to sit nor to carry out other basic needs. Women are getting sacked from jobs for sitting at the workplace or asking for masks to protect themselves from dust. They are not even regarded as workers, nor as humans.

It was the first time she and the organization representatives were going live on social media, updating their protest, and seeking support. They were getting them accustomed to social media features and adding them to their collective action repertoire (Tilly 1993) to fight for women workers' rights and challenging the capitalist patriarchy. The movement employed digital technologies for its organization, mobilization, and sustenance, to enforce the fundamental right to sit.

The movement raised awareness of the fundamental right violation, questioned the capitalist and patriarchal ideological structures that constitute the exploitation and oppression of women, and in turn, the precarious and gendered nature of jobs. Here, the very act to sit signified a collective resistance where chairs symbolized power over capitalist patriarchy.

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18. Digital Leisure and Aspirational Work among Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Women in Brazil

Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Julia Camargo, Payal Arora, Amanda Alencar, John Warnes, & Erika Pérez

Abstract

This chapter builds on a UNHCR Innovation Service project in partnership with Erasmus University Rotterdam, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, where we examined the opportunities afforded by digital leisure for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in northern Brazil. The project aimed to assess the ways in which refugees and migrants use digital media for entertainment and the possibilities of these uses for improved livelihoods. In this chapter, we focus on three women who participated in the project and their perspectives on content creation using digital media. The field work took place in late 2021 in two shelters in northwestern Brazil and involved in-depth interviews with fifteen participants, and a workshop on *how to be a digital influencer*. The analysis of these three cases presents different ways in which refugee and migrant women use digital media and their aspirations for a better life through content creation.

Keywords: digital leisure, refugees, migrants, content creation

Introduction

This chapter builds on a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Innovation Service project in partnership with Erasmus University Rotterdam, supported by the Government of Luxembourg, where we examined the opportunities afforded by digital leisure for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in northern Brazil. The project aimed to assess the

ways in which refugees and migrants use digital media for entertainment and the possibilities of these uses for improved livelihoods (Casswell 2019). In this chapter, we focus on three women who participated in the project and their perspectives on content creation using digital media. The analysis of these three cases presents different ways in which refugee and migrant women use digital media and their aspirations for a better life through content creation.

The field work took place between October and December 2021 in two Venezuelan shelters in northwestern Brazil and was developed in two phases: in-depth interviews with fifteen participants and a workshop on *how to be a digital influencer*. The workshop was designed to assist the participants build a profile, and get to know the world of social media and the current impact they have on our lives. One of the project's goals was to increase participants' interaction with their followers on digital platforms through stories of self-interest. Six classes were held, addressing topics such as: basic aspects to create a story, production, and post production of video and management of social networks. In all, ten Venezuelans produced videos.

Connectivity and Gender Gap

Although access to mobile phones is highly gendered in conditions of forced displacement, with gender gaps that vary depending on the context, Latin America and the Caribbean reflect some of the lowest gender gaps in terms of mobile ownership and use.¹ However, care and home-making responsibilities that are disproportionately undertaken by women and girls also affect the time they can devote to using devices and engaging in digital play (Arora 2019). This is profoundly problematic, especially considering that research has found that higher education opportunities for refugee and migrant women can be considerably expanded through digital technologies' access and training (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017).

Digital Leisure, Aspirational Content Creation, and Improved Livelihoods

Leisure has typically been defined on the basis of time, attempting to separate leisure time from other, more constrained activities such as work

1 <https://bit.ly/3Gt9lsz>

and self-care. However, time presents its own limitations as the experience of time differs between men and women due to the overlapping care tasks and responsibilities (Bittman and Wajcman 2000). Moreover, the possibility to engage in two activities simultaneously and the fragmentation of leisurely time due to interruptions means that for many, dedicated, pure leisure time is not a reality, and this should be considered when attempting to understand digital leisure (Ibid.). For our purposes, we consider that digital leisure comprises a range of activities such as gaming, entertainment, romancing, as well as content creation and consumption.

In this sense, there is a gap between the resources needed to provide free access and connectivity to refugees and the realization of their aspirations for digital use. According to Appadurai (2019), migrants' aspirations are often related to the difficulty that exists for their stories to fit dominant, mainstream narratives, with digital media opening new ways of documenting and representing possible life trajectories. Moreover, Witteborn (2019) connects the possibility to use mobile devices and data to the realization of migrant aspirations related to improved lives in social and financial terms. The possibility to connect and participate through digital technologies is positioned as key to achieve goals among migrant communities.

In this chapter, we focus on aspects of digital leisure related to content consumption and creation to assess the livelihood aspirations and strategies of three Venezuelan women living in shelters in northern Brazil. These cases exemplify the different ways in which women experience digital leisure and the existing connectivity limitations that pose significant barriers to the creation and sustainability of livelihood opportunities in forced migration contexts. Given the increasing presence of the gig economy and digital labour as an economic development practice (Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta 2017), it is important to understand how limited connectivity (or the lack of) could influence the livelihoods of refugees, especially for women.

In the context of forced displacement, some international organizations such as UNHCR, have recently been recalibrating their strategic approaches to digital inclusion, investing further in digitally enabled livelihoods. However, many livelihood interventions in the sector remain focused on skills development and subsidies. Critics argue that many of these initiatives have been implemented without real analysis of refugee needs and capacities; thus, there is unrealized potential for generating more sustainable impact for refugees over time (International Labour Organization 2021).

In terms of gender issues, it is important to consider an adaptation of the concept of "aspirational labour," which refers to the uneven gendered pursuit of creative activities that are seen as potential sources of social and

economic capital (Duffy 2016). Two of the main aspects of this concept are applicable here, namely the “narratives of authenticity and realness and the instrumentality of affective relationships” (Duffy 2016, 443). Moreover, the unique challenges faced by refugee women regarding digital livelihoods, not only concern the formal institutional constraints, lack of access to digital technologies, and connectivity, but they are also linked to more complex social and cultural factors. Focusing on Somali refugee women in Kenya and Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Ritchie’s (2017) work has already highlighted the precarious nature of refugee women’s evolving economy. This precariousness occurs especially in a context with low enterprise opportunities, where conservative gender norms and values persist among refugee groups. To further understand these issues, we need an approach that accounts for the specificities and diversity of refugee women’s experiences and situations.

Building on the data derived from the participatory workshop for content creation developed in this project, we analyse the ways in which Venezuelan refugee and migrant women create aspirational content that represents their perspectives and expectations of work and life in Brazil. In the next section, we provide details about the narrative profiles of three refugee women who engaged in field research.

Methods

The data in this chapter was extracted from a larger study assessing the real and aspirational digital lives of displaced Venezuelans in northern Brazil. For this, ten to fifteen participants in two different shelters, with diverse backgrounds, were recruited and selected to participate in the project.

Once participants were selected, interviews and focus groups were carried out, along with a digital mapping activity to assess the different platforms and usage purposes by communities. The aim was to assess their preferred digital leisure activities and the platforms they prioritize. Later, participants were invited to take part in a six-day workshop with a filmmaker on “How to Become a Digital Influencer.” During the workshop, training was provided to participants on how to create and boost their social media profile and their unique voice online, as well as on the “rules of the game” of social media platforms and their impact on people’s lives. They were also given suggestions and guidelines on how to tell stories about themselves, or things, places, and activities that interest them. The goal was to capture how they imagine themselves, promote engagement with and

within digital spaces, and provide a “creative” dimension that reveals their perspectives, aspirations, struggles, and belongings.

Aspirational Digital Narratives of Refugee Women in Brazil²

Raquel: The Eyebrow Expert

Raquel is twenty-five years old and arrived at the shelter from Venezuela five months ago. She worked as a merchant in her country and lives in Brazil with her partner and two of her four children. Raquel explains that she looks forward to moving to a different region in Brazil to get a job and settle. She uses her phone to access social media and to watch videos. In terms of her digital practices, she especially enjoys watching tutorials to learn things such as Portuguese and beauty tips, particularly how to do eyebrows.

Although she consumes videos from YouTube, Raquel has never uploaded a video, but she sees the possibilities in the creation of videos to teach and learn skills. When asked about whether she would like to be a digital influencer, she answered:

Well, mostly I would like to make videos on how to care for (plucking and trimming) eyebrows. Some people know how to do eyebrows, but not perfectly, and I have already practised how to do them perfectly (Personal interview).

In fact, in the video she created during the workshop (figure 18.1), was a tutorial on how to do eyebrows step-by-step, where she included an influencer’s name and a brand for her channel, and provided a detailed explanation of the process.

In the case of Raquel, she reflects an example of a woman who wants to display her skills online, creating content, and teaching others how to do it. Her perception of the value of beauty-related video content derives from her own consumption practices and her learning process. She also has an understanding of the teaching-learning possibilities of digital content. Raquel’s case illustrates two forms of aspiration, one that goes beyond the

² On consent: for the primary research, full consent was granted by participants to have their names and faces to be utilized within the research and associated products. However, for this report, names have been replaced and faces anonymized in photographs to minimize risk.



Figure 18.1 Screenshot of Raquel's video

connectivity and resource-related limitations she experiences as a refugee, and also Duffy's (2016) definition of aspirational labour, which includes female content creators who often capitalize on their passions to make a living online.

Displaced women, like Raquel, face issues to access sustainable connectivity that limit their possibilities and capacity to create content. During

the workshops, Raquel had little data on the phone, and she could not download the video production app used in the editing sessions. This was the first time Raquel attended a course about digital content, and she revealed that her posts were essentially on Facebook about memes, Christian messages, and family photos. After Raquel completed the course, she started sharing photos of her work as a beauty professional on the social media platform.

Lucía: A Story of Difficulty and Resilience

Lucía is in her thirties, travelling to Brazil due to health issues and the lack of medical access in Venezuela. She suffers from endometriosis and needs surgery. She works with Adra/United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the area of water, sanitation, and hygiene; she is a WASH officer³ at the shelter. She travelled with her husband and was recently divorced. She has been in Brazil for four years and enjoys watching funny videos and religious content that promotes reflection.

When asked about the possibility of making a living as a digital influencer by creating videos, she answered,

I don't know, but my dream is to make videos, because my story is hard to tell. I went through five surgeries and God lifted me up. Many people are in the same situation, I had two heart attacks and God raised me up and many things happened. When I arrived here, I was in very poor health. There are things I want the world to understand, that if they are experiencing difficult things, they need to have faith in God (Personal interview).

Her story is one of extreme difficulty and resilience, a story she feels compelled to share.

In the case of Lucía, she wants to motivate others and help them overcome their own difficulties. She is aware of the value and importance of her process to empower others. Inspirational content like the one produced by her constitute an important aspect of digital leisure in the sense that they can help people cope with difficulties and achieve desirable outcomes in mental health (Arora 2019). This kind of content is widely shared among

3 A WASH officer is responsible for the provision of technical support and guidance on activities within the areas of Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH), within the areas of responsibility where the UNHCR works.



Figure 18.2 Screenshot of Lucía's video

refugee communities as a “digital resilience tactic” (Udwan, Leurs and Alencar 2020). Consequently, it is important to highlight the potential of these creative contents and their associated practices to become a form of digital work. For instance, Lucía's desire to make and share motivational and inspirational videos reflects her desire to be a kind of influencer for the community who faces similar struggles.

Esperanza: My Husband's Dream

Esperanza is a twenty-six-year-old mother of three who travelled from Venezuela with her husband and children. When asked about her profession in Venezuela, she responded that she helped her husband with his business as a barber and fixing telephones.

She acknowledged the possibility of making a living through social media but stated that she had never tried to do it. When asked about the content she shares on social media, she said:

Posts giving hope and strength to people, for Venezuelans coming here or still there. I also post pictures of my kids, so my mom can watch them grow up (Personal interview).



Figure 18.3 Screenshot of Esperanza's video

During the workshop, Esperanza created a video devoted completely to her husband as a hardworking man and his dream of having his own barber's shop in Brazil.

It is possible to argue that for Esperanza it is important to support her husband in realizing his aspirations, rather than consider her own personal goals. She reflects an example of the ways in which many women devote their lives to those under their care and how they often live their lives through the eyes of their family members. It is interesting to note the difference between this participant and the other two, where we can see refugee women telling

their own stories, becoming the main character in their own narratives, whereas in this case she devotes the entire video to tell the story of one member of the family, her husband. This also supports Duffy's (2016) argument that different modes of content creation online perpetuate established constructions of gender. In this case, when given the opportunity to create content, Esperanza chooses to fill her expected gender role through the narrative she chooses to tell.

Conclusion

This chapter argued for the potential of digital leisure as a pathway to novel livelihood opportunities. The stories from the field push the notions of meaningful connectivity beyond the utility-driven notions of digital usage, in this case, for refugees and migrant women. It compels us to move beyond the standard “gender” and “empowerment” trope in development practice where applications are designed to enable limited practices for these women, such as the case of maternity apps, fertility apps, etc. Instead, we should attend to the nuance in women's self-expression through this form of digital storytelling. While typically the focus on beauty has been looked at as a gendered and restrictive notion, in combination with their context and motivation, it can be re-construed as enabling. Likewise, focusing on women's body and health, especially through such public disclosures of what is typically “private” can transform into a feminist act as it carves agency. Similarly, instead of interpreting the wife profiling her husband's aspirations as a mirror of patriarchy, one can reimagine this as a form of micro-power, as the wife gets to tell her husband's story and become the digital curator of his aspirations.

Beauty, the body, and care—all in isolation—can appear to entrench gender stereotypes, but when mediated and curated by these women through digital platforms, can foster novel forms of visibility, upskilling, storytelling, and perhaps new and possibly more dignified livelihoods.

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Vision



19. Beyond Underpaid Women and Robots: Towards a Better Future of Care Work

Kathryn (Kate) Boydell & Sharmi Surianarain

Abstract

This chapter interrogates the myth that the future of work, and specifically the future of care work, is a choice between low-value and underpaid work, and automation. The chapter reviews global data and case examples that suggest that there are huge opportunities for investment in care work and technology that could not only foster innovation to meet growing needs, but also create higher-paying, higher-value jobs, and safeguard against exploitation. The chapter makes a case for investing in care work and technology, with inclusion at the core—moving away from a scarcity and fear-based lens—towards an approach that emphasizes innovation, opportunity, and decent work.

Keywords: carework, future of work, gender, innovation, platform work

In her book, *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*, Ai Jen Poo (2015) says that the current approach to caring for the elderly comes from “a place of scarcity and fear,” a lens which constrains everything from discussion, to innovation, to investment in solutions for the future of care. As a result, we are stuck litigating the same questions of how we can afford social care and who will do it. And, because this same flawed lens of scarcity and fear distorts our understanding of the future of work, we are also stuck returning the same answers: underpaid women or robots.

The dominant narrative of the “fourth industrial revolution” has long been one where digitization drives job and wage attrition (Mishel 2022) and compromises worker conditions (Min et al. 2019). The automation of thinking

as well as doing—fuelled by the rise of machine learning and robotics and the synthesis of the two—will destroy jobs in the manual and knowledge work sectors alike, we are told (West 2018). In the service sector, which makes up a growing proportion of employment globally, digital advances will accelerate “platformization” of many types of service work, rendering workers functionally self-employed and without protections from employers, unions, or governments. In a simplistic narrative that pits robots against humans, we must be replaced entirely, or prop up human-centred jobs at the expense of progress.

In thrall to this binary, we are over-indexing on automation and under-indexing on human-centred activities such as caring. In the process, we risk overlooking real opportunities that lie at the nexus of the two—where productive innovation (technological or otherwise) meets an essence of care work that is deeply, enduringly human. Evidence from the adjacent healthcare space suggests that new approaches to both work and caregiving can augment one another (Kamineni 2022). Clearing the way for these “nexus opportunities” to scale requires challenging the prevailing narrative.

Recent data helps: it doesn’t bear out the narrative of outright job destruction.¹ The doom-mongers of the early pandemic had warned that since robots don’t fall ill, bosses would turn to them instead of people (Casselman 2021). Two years on, evidence for automation-induced unemployment is scant. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) faces a worker shortage, and wage-growth for low-skilled workers (thought to be replaceable by robots) is high.² A growing view is emerging that, in fact, across industries, automation doesn’t destroy jobs: it changes them (WEF 2020). While the nature of work itself might change, the future of work is still very human. One 2020 study (Adachi, Kawaguchi and Saito 2020) from Japan suggests that as robots become more widespread and cheap, a positive correlation between automation and employment emerges: an increase of one robot per 1,000 workers boosts firms’ employment by 2.2 per cent. Beyond the factory floor, artificial intelligence (AI) may have more to learn from humans than the other way round, as some argue that the new standard for artificial general intelligence should be work tasks

1 L. Rafael Reif, President, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *How to Survive the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, World Economic Forum online, January 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/authors/l-rafael-reif>

2 <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/01/22/economists-are-revising-their-views-on-robots-and-jobs>

such as those required of a home health aide—including the physical aid of a fragile human, observations of their behaviour, and communications with family and doctors (Mindell 2019).

David Autor, labour economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), notes that “machines both substitute for and complement human labour. Focusing only on what is lost misses a central economic mechanism by which automation affects the demand for labour: raising the value of the tasks that workers uniquely supply” (2015, 5). In their 2022 book, *The Work of the Future: Building Better Jobs in an Age of Intelligent Machines*, Autor and his co-authors even see a vitalized role for labour unions in helping to make sure that the gains from technology adoption are evenly distributed—though, as we’ll see, the nature of labour organizing itself may change, too.

In this context, the future of work and the future of care are inextricably linked. The pandemic has foregrounded the extent to which care work—unpaid or low paid, informal or formal—underpins all other work. Care work also represents a growth sector globally. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that over 2 billion people will need care by 2030—as a result of a growing and ageing population (Addati et al. 2018). At the same time, we have seen an acceleration of the use of technology in global responses to the pandemic, creating momentum for the adoption of digital and automation solutions in support of human health workers. In the 2021 report, “Switched On,” from the UK non-profit, The Health Foundation, the authors argue that “automation and AI can significantly enhance human abilities, such as with information analysis to support decision making, with the dividends accruing through combining human and machine input” (Hardie et al. 2021, 2). They are at pains to point out that this potential exists in social care as well as clinical roles; among their conclusions is a recommendation that the United Kingdom’s (UK) Department of Health and Social Care support the founding of a Royal College for Carers to professionalize the care workforce, “so they can use technology to augment their vital skills of emotional intelligence and creative problem solving.”

There is increasing openness to the idea that growing demand for care and the rapid spread of digitization can converge into a sustainable growth driver and be net positive for societies, and women in particular. Governments, venture capitalists, and social entrepreneurs alike are looking at the future of care work through a new lens of economic opportunity. Caregiving contributes a staggering \$648 billion to the United States (US) economy—more than the big pharma, social networking, and car industries

combined.³ According to the International Trade Union Confederation, an investment of two per cent gross domestic product (GDP) in care in India would create 11 million jobs, of which 32.5 per cent would be undertaken by women.⁴

Research suggests that global investments in the care sector could generate 206 million to 326 million jobs globally, and up to 475 million indirect jobs by 2030.⁵ Many of these jobs, and the systems of recruitment, training, compliance, and payment that underpin them, will be enabled by digital technology. These are the first wave of the “nexus opportunities” we describe, and they span all sectors of the economy: public, private, and hybrid.

The first nexus opportunity: Investing to shape the evolution of care marketplaces. Online marketplaces aim to solve market failures by connecting supply and demand. In the care space, this means connecting families with professional caregivers and the benefits and payment infrastructure to support them. Care.com,⁶ a US-based company operating in seventeen markets worldwide, is one such online marketplace where families looking for care can connect with caregivers across the spectrum of child, elder, and special needs care. The company was founded by former recruitment executive Sheila Marcelo, who had struggled to find care for her ailing father and her young children, and realized that this problem was widespread among working families in the “sandwich” generation. Marcelo built a data-driven company by looking at key care verticals across major metros in the US, latent demand and supply, and the challenges people reported in securing care. Since launching in May 2007, the service has expanded into enterprise care benefits, and claims to have made over 1.5 million successful matches between care seekers and care providers, and has signalled a shift from simply matching, to facilitating transactions and related employment services.

With employment marketplaces come legitimate concerns about safety, precarity, and possible exploitation, especially in economies and labour markets already marked by these. On this, the evidence is mixed. Research indicates that when these platforms emerge in previously opaque and

3 <https://www.pivotalventures.org/newsroom/648-billion-reasons-why-care-economy-serious-business>

4 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/columns/care-economy-uncharitable-to-women/article29619795.ece>

5 *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, International Labour Organization, cited by Valeria Esquivel, ILO Employment Policies & Gender Specialist, in remarks at the first IAFFE panel discussion on care in 2022. <http://www.iaffe.org/>

6 <https://www.care.com>

informal marketplaces, they can make a positive impact on the quantity and quality of work. Some gig workers themselves report greater flexibility and higher earnings: for instance, in South Africa, workers on the platforms SweepSouth and Smartmaid say they earn on average R3500 per month (approximately \$239), which appears to be higher than the average of R2600 (approximately \$178) earned by off-platform contract workers, and greater than the R3000 (approximately \$205) minimum monthly for full-time domestic workers.⁷ One study on platform work in the Global South (Heeks et al. 2020, 3) suggests that this is because “Southern labour markets are characterised by information failures. [...] For example, potential clients are often unable to identify who or where relevant workers are or what their typical costs should be.” By addressing these information failures, platforms can increase employment and improve safety, earnings, and even inclusion. The study cites disabled workers in the Philippines, migrant workers in South Africa, rural workers in Pakistan, lower-caste workers in India, and women in multiple locations all reporting “having been excluded from local labour markets on what they perceived to be discriminatory grounds but then included in what they saw as the level playing field of platform-based labour markets” (Heeks et al. 2020, 6).

Inclusion at scale will not happen automatically as a happy side-effect of platformization, however—especially in the care sector. Research among gig-based care workers in Thailand, both on and off digital platforms, showed that the labour platforms tend to “reproduce gendered divisions of labour by intentionally recruiting women into care work, discriminating against men, gay and transgender individuals,” yet, despite this, “many platforms do not have policies that account for the needs of women workers” (Just Economy and Labor Institute 2022). The researchers outline sixteen recommendations for platform companies to address this in the design of the technology. Initiatives such as Fairwork, a collaboration between the University of Oxford and the University of Cape Town, provide annual ratings of digital platforms on principles related to worker conditions—from fair pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation. In addition to rewarding companies for inclusion and good working conditions, Fairwork shines a light on good employer practices in an industry that, at its worst, can certainly be exploitative. These initiatives also capitalize on a growing trend—where both investors and consumers increasingly care about ethical consumerism and fair work practices.

Also, social enterprises serving hybrid public-private markets can lead the way here. Harambee, based in South Africa, has made inclusive

7 <https://restofworld.org/2021/global-gig-workers-on-demand-cleaner-south-africa/>

recruitment a key design principle of its youth employment network that was first developed and proven among private employers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this network became central to the government's rapid recruitment of more than half a million young people for stipended jobs as school assistants, approximately 300,000 of whom were new, first-time labour market entrants—formerly “invisible” young people, mostly women, who had not been reached by any government programmes since leaving formal education.⁸

Even as platforms solve information asymmetries between worker and client, they can create new ones between worker and platform. Yet, here we see the platforms themselves enabling a new kind of digital labour organizing. Take the case of Handy,⁹ an online marketplace for domestic workers in the US. After two years of negotiation, advocates for domestic workers won an agreement that includes \$15-an-hour minimum pay and paid time off for domestic workers on the Handy platform. This was to be paid for by the company and includes occupational accident insurance, and a formal process to address workplace concerns, with anti-retaliation protections. These are huge protections for a vulnerable category of workers who have been previously left out of specific employment legislation like social security. These conditions are legally enforceable through a private agreement—worker advocates literally wrote protections into a private contract with input directly from domestic workers, something they could not count on politicians to do. Even in places where the industrial-era labour movement is barely established, this new kind of digital organizing is gaining momentum. Reporting on a mass strike among platform food delivery workers in Thailand, the *Bangkok Post* reports that “[...] these drivers in Thailand have been organising for years through a number of Facebook and Line groups exclusive to drivers of the platform. One of largest of such groups [...] has over 40,000 members” (Hicks 2020). Recent landmark shifts in the recognition of delivery and transportation platform workers’ rights in Europe (Rankin 2021) underline the potential power of this kind of labour organizing in the platform era.

If well-designed marketplaces can solve a significant demand challenge (where and how to find care), and if well-regulated and protected, they can also address the chronic under-payment of care workers. But it isn't just about addressing existing demand and solving challenges for the labour market. We can leverage technology and innovation to unlock new approaches to care delivery in neglected spaces, creating entirely new sectors such as

8 <https://www.harambee.co.za/breaking-barriers-november-2021/>

9 <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/domestic-workers-handy-labor/>

“FemTech” and “AgeTech,” which can spur job creation with huge growth potential while they address widespread health and care challenges.

FemTech investments are sparking a revolution in how feminine health and care services are delivered. There is a growing number of investments in technology platforms that can have direct and indirect impact on women’s health, including fertility platforms that provide resources and information to those trying to grow their families, women-friendly health systems that target specific women’s health issues such as preeclampsia, menopause, and period trackers. These are not rich-world lifestyle innovations. Cervical cancer detection, for example, is impeded by an extreme shortage of doctors trained to detect it in the developing world, where eighty per cent of global cases occur. The EVA system, an assistive AI tool from FemTech company, MobileODT, addresses this gap by enabling midwives to capture and analyse scans for accurate diagnosis without specialist training.¹⁰ The company is adapting the same basic technology to assist in sexual assault forensic documentation. By investing in innovations that support women’s health issues and requirements in an integrated way, we can target unmet needs, create new livelihoods, and enable women to manage their health, family, and work requirements more easily. The growth potential is massive: while \$14 billion has been invested in FemTech globally to date, in 2020, the sector still attracted only three per cent of total healthtech funding globally¹¹—suggesting a huge opportunity for additional investment and innovation. Many of the health conditions targeted are vastly under-researched and under-funded areas that, unlike male-targeted conditions, affect all or most women—who are seventy-five per cent likelier than men to adopt digital tools for healthcare. That makes for a huge potential market.

Likewise, AgeTech pioneers are reinventing senior care delivery. In India, a multigenerational household is the prevalent form of family and serves as the main care support system for a family’s elderly relatives. However, this is changing fast as younger generations are moving farther away and are seeking other alternatives to ensure their elderly parents are well cared for. India has an endless supply of elderly care providers; however, a majority of them are focused on providing physical care, leaving a gap in the market for other unmet needs of the elderly—a gap spotted by new models like Khyaal.¹²

10 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/magazine-41553186>

11 <https://www.economist.com/business/2021/10/16/femtech-firms-are-at-last-enjoying-an-investment-boom>

12 <https://khyaal.com/>

Khyaal—“care” in Hindi—is a subscription-based service that includes nutritional guidelines and dietary suggestions by nutritionists, medical care such as teleconsultations, appointment booking, and medication reminders, essential care such as online ordering for food, medicine, groceries, and digital literacy, and empowerment via online community events and learning sessions. To keep up with India's fast-growing elderly population—predicted to be 300 million by 2050—Khyaal aims to partner with fifty different organizations across the country to provide senior citizens with holistic care.

Cases like these suggest that technology can augment our ability to deliver care at the scale of the growing need. Of course, there is a shadow side to all new technologies, and this may be especially true in a sector historically shaped by systems of gender-, class- and race-based oppression. Questions about the control of sensitive data, AI bias, algorithmic transparency, and more, are still emergent, and these must be met with answers that go beyond an assumption that the market will self-regulate. But remedies to those problems exist—not least in the hands of the engineers themselves. In their book (2022, 51), David Autor and his co-authors recognize the responsibility of their own MIT students in designing technology that can either empower or disempower workers, writing that, “engineers encode social relationships and preferred futures into the machines they build.” Some of that responsibility will be enacted through new disciplines and practices, such as ethical AI or by designing for inclusion, as Harambee’s labour market platform for excluded youth in South Africa demonstrates—a platform that is co-created by the government and the private sector. Indeed, Autor argues, progress will come from institutional and state leadership that looks beyond the frame of commercial success: “the goal is not merely to win, but to nudge innovation in directions that will benefit the nation: among them complementing workers, boosting productivity, and providing a foundation for shared prosperity” (MIT Task Force report 2019, 45).

When it comes to the future of care work, we are falling short of this aspiration. The new models and innovations described here hold promise, but many operate in a care context that lacks large-scale, coordinated, sector-level planning and investment.

There are many reasons for this. One is simply a failure of dominant political and economic imaginations shaped by a cultural inability to see caregiving as work. Like all work primarily done by women, care work is tarred with the pernicious low-skill label which lowers the status of those who do it and those who study it. Historically neglected by mainstream economics, care work has, as a result, been under-counted, under-valued,

and under-invested. In Anne-Marie Slaughter's words, "care feminism has taken a backseat to career feminism." As care feminists, we would go further and say that care feminism has not even been in the same car. Many of us balk at terms like "marketplace," "platform," and "investment" in the context of caregiving. Economic geographer Julie MacLeavy puts this succinctly in her expansive review, "Care Work, Gender Inequality and Technological Advancement in the Age of COVID-19": "The emotions and connection involved mean that it is difficult to approach care as a standard commodity. Hence decisions around care and socially reproductive work are seldom made on the basis of economic cost and the reality of marketized care may not conform to standard economic assumptions" (MacLeavy 2020, 144). But the truth is that care is already a commodity, traded in currencies hard and soft, in highly unregulated and unprotected ways, in transactions between often desperate people who have few options. Nancy Folbre (2012), in her seminal work, *For Love or Money*, suggests that we ought to challenge the ways in which love and money historically combine and intersect—and urges us to reject the use of the word "commodification," a pejorative term applied to any service provided for money, implying that such service is stripped of emotion.

It is time for care feminism to engage with economics head on. Economists bring precision and broad consensus to how economic activity is counted and reported. They develop models that value it properly, including wider systemic effects. And they propose new investment mechanisms to shape and unlock that value. In other words, they define economic levers and how to use them. If we are to shape the economic landscape of care and care work in the coming decades, we must get to grips with these levers ourselves. We must develop and spread new ways to count, value, and invest in care. Over 16 billion hours are spent on unpaid care work every day.¹³ If this work—as priceless as it is—was counted in real GDP estimates, it would be valued at over \$11 trillion—three times the size of the world's tech industry.¹⁴ It is this reduction to hard numbers in our economic accounting that, first, reveals its value, and second, gives us a language with which to describe its many dimensions, and to label, categorize, and regulate it. Quantifying care this way may make us feel queasy, but it is necessary for care work to be situated within a broader framework of workers' rights. It is also necessary for terms like "the infrastructure of care" to be understood as more than metaphor.

13 <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/womens-unpaid-care-work-everything-to-know/>

14 <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620928/bp-time-to-care-inequality-200120-summ-en.pdf>

Giving and receiving care is both a human and an economic act—perhaps the only truly universal one. Demographic trends of ageing and population growth suggests that over 400 million jobs could be generated across the world.¹⁵ A new narrative is emerging: one that sees this growing need as an opportunity, not a threat. One that sees the care economy as vital, investable infrastructure that can leverage technology to create good jobs at scale. One that is already yielding new models for care and new frameworks for worker inclusion and rights. The path to a better future of care and to a better future of work lie beyond scarcity and fear, in the same direction.

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15 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_713372.pdf

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20. Work and Place: The Non-Boundaries of Women's Work

Usha Raman

Abstract

Issues around women's unpaid labour and their difficulties in balancing paid work with domestic duties have received attention in academic and policy circles, raising questions about women's invisible contributions to the formal and informal economy. These questions point to the need to rethink the fundamental categories of work and workplace, the ways in which women negotiate the fuzzy boundaries between domestic and paid labour, and the material realities of where and how this takes place. What notions of security and safety might operate, what does a workplace look and feel like, and how does a woman understand and build her creative and economic identity when this must be shaped within the domestic sphere? This chapter draws on conversations with women bangle makers in the Indian city of Hyderabad to unpack their daily negotiations between private and public, personal and occupational spheres as they carve out space for paid work.

Keywords: women workers, artisanal workers, informality, workplace, worklife, India

Ask a woman what work she does, and she may have to pause for a moment (or longer) and give you an answer that is almost always incomplete. Ask a woman if she has a job, and the answer may come a little easier. A job has a box around it. It has a name. It represents hours that can be packed into a discrete container. Possibly, if she is lucky, it includes a sense of regularity and a level of recognition. If you are of a modern mindset, you may ask if she works "outside the home," distinguishing then, in the manner of our times, the paid work that is distinguishable in the employment marketplace from the unpaid labour that all women do within the confines of their homes.

Much has been written about the need to count women's unpaid domestic and care work, through the lens of feminist economics (Himmelweit 1995; Bhattacharya 2021) and the sociology of gender (Shelton 1999), and more recently, in relation to its impact on gender relations in India (Singh and Pattanaik 2020). There has also been concern expressed globally on the need to recognize women's unpaid work as an integral part of a nation's economy, and the ways in which it impinges on women's opportunities to engage in other spheres of public life, including paid work, civic, political, and leisure activities (Robinson 2006; Kabeer 2007).

Our preoccupation in the FemLab¹ project has been to understand how the everyday textures of women's lives contain and constrain their engagement with paid work, and if and how they seek and nurture solidarities through networks of mediated and unmediated communication. In this chapter, I focus on one small subgroup of women—home-based artisanal workers—to understand the micro-dynamics that are at play when the home is the place of work. Drawing on conversations with women bangle makers in the Indian city of Hyderabad, I seek to unpack their daily negotiations between private and public, personal and occupational spheres as they carve out space for paid work. I argue that increasingly, definitions of informality, security, and even labour, must expand to accommodate the realities of women's lives, particularly those whose paid work is done within domestic spaces.

There's Work ... and There's Work

"Meri naukri nahin hai magar kaam karti hoon." (*I don't have a job but I do work.*) This is what many women who work in India's informal labour force may say, when asked if they have a job. Just as in English, there are many words in Indian languages that refer to work of various kinds, each carrying a different charge and evoking a different imaginary. The Hindi word *karamchari* literally translates into English as "worker," but it is applied almost exclusively to those who perform visible, measurable, nameable tasks. The image of street sweeper, construction worker, farmhand, or factory worker is what comes to mind: those who earn a living by the sweat of their brow. The imaginary of the worker—the individual often at the bottom of the service and product value chain—is restricted to such visible work and

1 For more details and background of the project, please see <https://femlab.co>.

this is the imaginary that most often influences policy and welfare measures related to informal workers.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO) estimates that close to 147 million women around the world work in or close to their homes, simultaneously managing duties such as child or elder care and other household chores.² In India, home-based women workers numbered approximately 17.2 million (16.4 per cent of all women in the informal sector) (Raveendran and Vanek 2020), and are among the large group that have little or no access to social protection and are not easily governed by any labour regulations. Their terms of work are informal, almost always with no written contracts, operating on the basis of loose oral agreements.

Bangle making work in Hyderabad is concentrated in the old city area, a historic part of the city that is now a criss-crossing network of congested lanes and buildings pressed close together in a complex of the commercial and the residential. At the northern end of the area, marked by a fifteenth-century monument that is emblematic of the city—Charminar—is the bangle bazaar, or Lad Bazaar. The many homes in which women work, making the famous gemstone-studded bangles, are spread across a three-kilometre radius from the Bazaar. The conventions of the Muslim-dominated area restrict women from going out to work, so in order to supplement family income, they take on petty jobs, ranging from embroidery and tailoring (for those more skilled) to rolling incense sticks and making bangles. One study estimated that around 15,000 women in Hyderabad are engaged in bangle making,³ but it is likely that this number is an under-estimate, as my conversations with the women revealed that they often co-opt the help of family members and neighbours to complete an order even as only one of them interacts with the contractor. In fact, their introduction to the work is by word-of-mouth, as Femida⁴ described to me:

My *chachi* [aunt] used to take it from three to four people, and she told us about this work. So I used to send my sisters to her and get the *Gota*⁵ from her. My sister learnt it from her and told us about it. My younger sister learnt it. They learnt it and told us about it that this is how it is. I

2 <https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/home-based-workers#snapshot>

3 <https://www.icmrindia.org/casestudies/catalogue/Economics/Economics%20of%20Bangle%20Market-Case.htm>

4 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

5 The base material used for embedding stones.

started it after observing them. And now I am doing this work from the last so many years (Personal interview, August 31, 2021).

My interviews with the women revealed that this was work they did in the interstices of domestic life, and even as their households desperately needed the income, they counted it as “extra,” something that they serendipitously came into, thanks to their kinship or community networks. And because it is not considered “employment,” families are less likely to object to the women taking it up. Femida says, “I do not even have the permission for doing this work ... but because my daughter is small, they say you do it,” implying that it is the convenience of not leaving the house—and the consequent invisibility—that makes such work permissible.

Circles of Responsibility

The entrenched social norms and gendered roles make the home a multi-purpose domain of activity for these artisanal workers. Take the case of Afreen, whose workspace is a small corner of her one-room home that folds back whenever it is needed for other things. Here, she spends six to eight hours a day, time garnered from domestic duties, making the gemstone-encrusted bangles. Her children often help her. When her husband returns, she puts away the materials, turning her workspace back into a kitchen, and gets busy making dinner.

Nadia, a fellow bangle maker, describes her routine thus:

I used to complete the household chores in one hour or half an hour. However, I used to face the problem of having food timely. If I leave the Gotas [bangle moulds] like that, they would dry up. And if they dried up, I had to do all the work even more quickly. I had to wash clothes and all that. So I had to wake up early in the morning and do all the work. I used to continue working at night till 8:00 or 9:00 p.m., till the time my husband returned from work. And then again I would continue the household work at night like soaking and washing the clothes. That is how I had to do the household work. I had to wash clothes during the night, and then again I had to start doing the Gota making work the next morning (Personal interview, August 30, 2021).

The lack of separation between household work and paid work, while offering flexibility and convenience, also makes it impossible to even conceive of

leisure. The low pay makes it necessary to work long hours to make the income worthwhile.

I do all the work along with keeping my daughter with me. I wake up early in the morning, do all the work. My sisters, or my younger daughter and all get the Gota, come to me and give it to me at home. I keep my daughter along with me and make it side by side. [...] I feed her [daughter] food and water quickly and make her sleep, and I continue the work while she sleeps. When she wakes up, then I feed her, she plays, I look after her, and that time I stop doing the work. After that I start working again in the evening. My father and all return from work and they take her and look after my daughter. And till 12:00 a.m-12:30 a.m, or till whatever amount of time I give my daughter to them, all of us keep working and making together till that time (Shahida, Personal interview, August 31, 2021).

The poor ventilation and lighting in most of the homes, and the long hours spent hunched over the bangles has led to severe eye strain and chronic neck and shoulder pain—occupational hazards that are not listed in any workers' manual. There is no such manual, no authority to whom one can appeal for better working conditions. The complex negotiations they must make within the family to be “permitted” to do this paid work also preclude any room for sympathy within the home.

The Unwritten Contract

Once every few days, a contractor brings the raw materials to the women's homes—bangle frames covered with lac, a pouch of glittering stones, and a set of designs. The exchange of materials is recorded in a notebook. And every few days, they return the finished product—several sets of stone-studded bangles, for which they each receive a payment of roughly INR 60 a set (about 80 ¢). In a good week, a bangle maker may earn around INR 1,500 (about \$20).

They keep a complete written record of the number of pieces made by me in a notebook, like if I made 100 pieces or 50 pieces. They keep the entire written record under my name. After writing it down, they update all of that in the evening on a piece of paper and tell me that today you have done the work which is worth X rupees. And then they total the work done during the entire week on the eighth day and give me my salary. They

pay me my salary along with giving me the written record, which could be around 1300 rupees [...] (Rashida, Personal interview, August 30, 2021).

It's a supply chain built on word-of-mouth, a handwritten register, and an exchange of materials and cash. The bangle maker is the last rung—or the first—in a ladder that begins in these tiny one-room homes and ends in the shiny shop shelves of Lad Bazaar, where the bangles are sold at a price that is nearly fifty times the cost of labour. The women have no room for negotiation, as one of the women tells me; if one of them is unhappy with the deal, the contractor can find many to take her place. There is an informal understanding of what quality means, and a tacit acceptance that the buyer's word is supreme.

If I make a mistake some time, then what those people do is they deduct the money, and say that we do not pay in such cases. If I make one piece wrong, then I need to make it again from scratch. Then they give the next lot of Gota after some time (Femida).

Farzana, another bangle maker, adds, "They say that we have many people here who can do the work, you are not the only one who is doing it."

The distance from the market—in psychological and physical terms—and the lack of a defined worker identity make it difficult for the women to get a sense of what their work is worth. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have been working for some years in the old city on women's livelihoods and empowerment issues have been trying to get the government to recognize these women as workers, a first step to accessing some form of social security. Shaheen Women's Collective⁶ and Kriti Social Initiatives⁷ are among these. Jameela Nishat, founder of Shaheen, and Himani Gupta, founder and trustee of Kriti, in separate interviews emphasized that one of the main challenges was to get the women to see themselves as workers, as people who had a skill that had value in the market. Working in the home, without direct interaction with the market, clearly defined work norms, or a sense of the larger group that they are a part of, these women think of themselves as just doing something for a bit of much-needed extra cash. The absence of established contractual norms emerged as a huge disadvantage during the COVID-19 crisis, when the demand for bangles dropped drastically, along with the amounts they were paid.

6 <https://shaheencollective.org>

7 <https://kriti.org.in>

When Work is a Collapsible Box in the Home

The COVID-19 pandemic turned the idea of work-from-home into a trope, a meme-able moment in which many workers across the spectrum were forced to turn their living spaces into work spaces, experiencing all the conflicts and the conveniences that this collision of contexts brought. For those with large enough homes and the ability to draw clear lines between the personal and professional both in terms of time and space, there was less to worry about. But for many who had to juggle childcare (with schools shut) or face the impossibility of setting up video call-worthy backdrops in cramped quarters, it was not that simple. Suddenly everyone was discovering a new politics of the familiar that demanded new types of negotiation and boundary making.

For women who have always worked from home, and whose living spaces have never allowed for much differentiation or separation into zones of personal and occupational, these are not questions they have ever been asked to consider. In some countries, white collar personnel who choose to work from home must subject their workspaces to scrutiny—for reasons of occupational safety, separation from domestic space, and other productivity-related concerns. Can there be similar attention paid to the context of such home-based work as artisanal crafts? Or can we imagine collective spaces of work that are more like communal courtyards, where women can come together to work a little more comfortably, even as they remain close enough to have an eye on their domestic responsibilities? Would this kind of physical coming together also engender a sense of the working—skilled—self?

For the bangle makers of Hyderabad, for whom the domestic and the occupational are leaky categories that inhabit the same space, skill is, for now, a matter of ensuring that they make the best of the Gota they are given, and do it within the hours they have.

Conclusion

All work is messy and multi-layered, shaped by forces often beyond the control of the individual or even the collective. But in an economy and society whose rules reflect patriarchal norms and beliefs, women's work is particularly fraught. This influences what is considered work worth paying for, the definition (and recognition) of a worker in the eyes of the state and the self, the regulation and organization of workspaces, and ultimately, the micro-negotiations that need to be made in order to engage in work, let

alone set the terms for it. There are now opportunities for women in such occupations to enter online marketplaces, where their work is contracted by piece for sale on digital storefronts. This may be an opening for digital entrepreneurs to consider rethinking fairness in compensation and contractual terms, keeping in mind the contexts where such work takes place. When one looks at these issues in relation to the most vulnerable women in the informal sector, it is clear that we need to reset the frame, and sharpen the focus on their lives. The questions we need to pose to those who set the terms for work, must be based on a redefinition of how and what counts as work—and what counts as workplace.

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21. The Future of Dishonourable Work

Payal Arora

Abstract

What is the “honour culture” and how does this travel to the digital world? Is there a place for dishonourable work in this contemporary age? This chapter argues that we need to break free from this historically and often patriarchally constructed shackle where individual virtue and vice is dependent on our work. No human being should be valued based on the nature of their labour, but rather, the level of integrity they bring to it. Given that human beings can’t help but imbibe meaning from their toil, we need to move away from a template that devalues us by what we do, and fuel an alternative paradigm that centres on the dignity of labour. As long as honour holds a place in the world of labour, it serves as a cancer that eats into the fabric of human dignity.

Keywords: honour culture, future of work, gender inequality, innovation, digital dignity

I was a waitress for three and a half years at an Indian restaurant in San Francisco in the early 1990s. I come from an economically well-off family in Bengaluru, so “waiting” on people was a novel experience for me. I was excited though as it was my first job abroad and I saw it as performing a part. We waitresses had to wear *salwar kameez*, traditional Indian attire, and *namaste* people as they entered. When the restaurant closed each night, the staff got to eat their dinner for free before heading home. There was a ritual to that. The owners, an old Gujarati couple, sat at the front desk, the waitresses and the cooks ate their meals on the floor of the kitchen, and the Mexican dishwasher had his dinner in the backroom storage space. Looking back, what strikes me as odd was how quickly I slipped into this social arrangement. At the time, it did not occur to me to ask why we didn’t all just sit at the table and eat together, using the nice restaurant cutlery.

Lesser Than ... Are We What We Do?

It is easy to fall into the explanation of the centuries-old Indian caste system as a way of sorting “our worth” based on the “purity” of our occupation, “once a servant, always a servant” logic. This was one of the most imaginative social ordering inventions, of rationalizing group hierarchies along arbitrary principles, including that of occupation. This system of applied status has somehow stood the test of time and persists in the global and modern economy.

What is remarkable is how this valuation of human virtue based on the work we do has manifested across the world, albeit in different ways. For instance, Sara Asselman, in her thesis (2019) paints a vivid picture of Filipina domestic workers' struggle for respect and recognition in Morocco as what they do is largely considered “dishonourable work.” The stigma that comes with engaging in the economy of care has an added ethnic dimension in this context, given that the majority of the domestic workers in Morocco are migrant women from the Philippines. Ironically, the very devaluation of these migrant women's labour fuels the demand for them. This is due to a common and historically built perception of this group as natural caregivers who are best suited for this kind of work. As Asselman argues,

[...] in Morocco domestic labour is viewed as dishonourable work, that only women should be responsible for this kind of labour, and that somehow, Filipina women's ethnic and racial identities make them better at it. I suggest that because of the history of slavery, and it being a prevalent phenomenon in Moroccan society as late as the 20th century, the collective imaginary of the Moroccan society continues to hold ideals and principles of domestic and care labour having low value in society, and that it should therefore be relegated to marginalized groups. I also argue that domestic and care work are not simply viewed as women's work because of the role that women play in procreation but also because there is an apparent devaluation of womanhood and female bodies (p. iv).

Naturalizing an entire group of people based on their gender, ethnic, and national status as intrinsically adept at a given industry and simultaneously degrading that industry as “lesser than” has served the political economy of global supply chains through reduced wages and increased exploitation (Fougère and Moulettes 2007; Christopher 2020; Hall 1993). We see this through the circulating of global clichés, from women as naturally good at care work, to Chinese as not the “creative type” but the “manufacturing type.” Carly Fiorina, a former boss of Hewlett-Packard, remarked in an interview

(Schumpeter 2015) with *The Economist*, that, “Yeah, the Chinese can take a test, but [...] they’re not terribly imaginative. They’re not entrepreneurial. They don’t innovate—that’s why they’re stealing our intellectual property.”

Almost a decade later, despite China taking the global lead on 5G networks, FinTech and cryptocurrency, smart apps, renewable energy, e-commerce, and much more, we still get respected media outlets churning out articles that uncritically celebrate the Western culture’s innate gift to innovate unlike “collectivist” cultures like China. For instance, in a 2021 *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, economist Carl Benedikt Frey makes his case of how the “individualistic” culture gives the United States an innovation edge over China. He feeds into the tired old evolutionary logic of how Christianity, migration, and mobility-based occupations such as herding, baked in distinct psychological traits over time in the Western mind, such as “greater interpersonal trust, less conformity, and less reliance on authority, which helped facilitate the flow of ideas.”

This perspective is nothing but a rehash of the psychologist Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory of the 1960s (Hofstede 2016) which neatly demarcated entire groups of people as individualistic or collectivistic. It became and still is the preferred management template for cross-cultural organizational work. Experts across the spectrum have used this trope over the decades to explain away global hierarchies and inequalities, attributing this to group cultures and mindsets, instead of persistent colonialist discourses, policies, and infrastructural and institutional arrangements that shape labour markets across the globe. The decades of critique of this theory as reductive, essentialist, and deterministic, have made few dents on its popularity.

This framework continues to bracket entire groups of people with certain propensities for certain kinds of work—Western people as “innovators” and Eastern people as “laggards,” stuck in what Frey sees as an “obedience trap.” Frey (2021) doubles down on this argument to explain the Chinese plight by attributing it to their tradition of collective work practice as a malady or “affect”:

The legacy of rice farming, which required a high degree of collaboration, continues to *affect* [added italics] the Chinese. Rice paddies require standing water, so people in rice-growing regions had to build elaborate irrigation systems. Suddenly, one family’s water use affected their neighbors, making societies more collectivist.

Collective practice here translates to traditional legacies that weigh down entire cultures. From this worldview, individualistic innovators bring more

value to society than a community of rice farmers. Never mind the fact that innovation has been overhyped as a solution to our collective contemporary problems of planetary health and the climate crisis, global pandemics, poverty and social inequality, and democratic and political upheavals (Cillo et al. 2019). I have argued elsewhere (Arora 2019) that what we need is less innovation, especially when innovation has come to mean tech solutionism in the form of a new app, a platform, a software. Instead, societies can boost the well-being of their people by committing to reforms and empathetic values that are rooted in well-established cooperative practices. Moreover, as voices for sustainability grow louder, management gurus and experts of our day such as Frey succeed in normalizing a schizophrenia in the culture and innovation discourse—talking up sustainability, collaboration, and cooperation by culturally appropriating the rhetoric of community practices in the Global South, while simultaneously valourizing Western individualism as a pathway to innovation.

Moving up the Value Chain

The social labelling of entire groups as innately better or worse at certain kinds of work, becomes more complicated as the “virtue” of that work shifts over time. If we follow social progression over the ages, under traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, work was considered penance for Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The Greeks viewed work as a curse, while the Romans saw artisanal work as “vulgar.” The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century turned this around, tying morality and virtue to an “honest day’s work.” As Gayle Porter, Organizational Change Management scholar, explains (2004, 425), “the meaning of work has varied across time and culture – a curse, a calling, a social obligation, a natural activity, a means to better life, or simply what we do because we have to.”

While the value of work may evolve, the worker may not share the same momentum. As women have entered what used to be “male turfs” in professions like education and medicine, it resulted in the devaluation of these domains, manifesting in lesser pay, reputation, and honour. Surgery, a long male-dominated expertise with high esteem, dealt with the influx of women doctors through a reorganization of their specialities along conventional gender lines, and their systematic devaluation:

The subsequent collective abandonment by men of now female-dominated fields is, at least in part, because of the gender-specific stigma and wage

penalty associated with working within a “feminine” occupation. A tipping point, when approximately one-third of a field becomes women, leads to a precipitous decline in men employed in the field (Temkin 2020).

The fact is that those who have the power to assess value are those most likely to value themselves the most and reorganize the structures to support these renewed and oftentimes patriarchal value systems.

The Double Burden—Honour and Work

Honour is a resource that can be accumulated and/or reduced based on established behavioural codes, signalling one’s inherent worth. These codes are often distinctly gendered across societies. In honour cultures, typically women working outside the house, being mobile and interacting with and alongside strangers, is looked upon with “a tinge of immorality”—shop girls, daytime security personnel, airline hostesses, traffic cops, beauty technicians, *tuk-tuk* drivers, and tourist guides.

Communications scholar Katy Pearce (Pearce and Vitak, 2016) captures the spectrum of fears of many young women in the “honour culture” of Azerbaijan as they go online. The “right” women’s behavioural codes require them to be modest, quiet, decent, and chaste, else they would bring dishonour to their families and communities. One of her participants shares her experience of regularly receiving disapproving comments on every Facebook post—even if just a photo of a sunset—saying things like, “Don’t you have anything better to do?” Eventually, she blocked most of her friends and family members to avoid the harassment, although that resulted in self-ostracism.

The management of reputation has become even more confounding as women workers are compelled to take to social media platforms, as in the case of Indian and Bangladeshi artisanal workers to resell wares due to market lockdowns during the pandemic. Given that honour can be “taken away” by inappropriate and visible behaviour, social media poses specific and new forms of threats for women as they struggle to manage their digital self-impressions while trying to eke out a living with their customers online. Dishonour can be triggered by any number of digital “wrongs” driven by patriarchal norms—an upload of an “immodest” photo or video, liking an “inappropriate post,” of being too forward, too outspoken, too social (Wikan 1984; Dawley 2000).

In a recent fieldwork in India on girls’ digital engagements, their mothers shared a common belief that the family’s honour comes before

their daughter's personal aspirations, desires, or dreams. As one mother explains,

The world is so bad, and the phones give you access to these bad things. I don't want Aju [her daughter] to see bad things—if men and boys find your number, they can send you wrong messages. Aju is a girl—if she posts something bad, the society will blame me—the mother, and not the father. It is the mother's responsibility to teach her daughter the ways of the world and to make her smart so that she can stay safe and away from society's eyes. If something bad happens with Aju online, the entire family will suffer and feel dishonored. Also, we have three daughters. Who will marry them if they think our family is bad! (Bhatia, Arora and Pathak-Shelat 2021, 4765).

For women in the Global South (Ghosh 2021; Komarraju et al. 2021) who jump into the workforce despite these challenges, they deploy several online tactics to manufacture honour. In Nepal, many rural women have moved to the city to work and send money home. Kabita, a first-generation wage earner, is a case in point. She works as a tour guide and is aware of the thin line she treads as she interacts with “open” lifestyles of the city in terms of social freedoms, perceived as dishonourable to her community. While she enjoys the pleasure of being independent, she crafts her identity online to show her family back home that she is still a “good girl” through her modest choice of clothing. She leverages the digital remittance economy, a conventional pathway for earning honour by sons who send money back home and make their families proud. The “assumption is that a daughter engaged in a ‘dishonourable’ profession would be too ashamed to send any of her earnings to her parents,” argues International Studies scholar Barbara Grossman-Thompson (2017, 501).

Other strategies are to obscure their identities by using stock photos for their profiles, self-censorship, posting only about “serious things” and business-related matters, and often holding multiple accounts, handles, and profiles. Collective self-presentation is important as women work together to manufacture the reputation of their industry, their work, and thereby themselves through tactical tagging and sharing with the right social networks to reinforce certain impressions of their work to those back home.

The fact remains though that despite these tactics, the burden to preserve individual and family honour falls disproportionately on girls and women in the Global South. This pushes women's digital work to operate on a landmine of morality. They face an uphill battle to strive for inattention in an attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001). While women's labour

participation has improved over the decades at a global level, regions with strong patriarchal norms like the Middle East, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa are witnessing a stagnation or even a decline in their participation. According to 2021 World Bank estimates,¹ India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. With less than a third of women (fifteen or older) working or actively looking for a job, digital platforms promise to exacerbate an already critical situation on gender participation in the workforce. For such women to have a future in the workplace, we need to confront our patriarchal past.

Our Choice to Let Go

Choice is a privilege. In times of COVID-19, the choice of work is an astounding luxury to most people, particularly in precarious and vulnerable contexts. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), more than 1.7 million Kenyans lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic. The Kenyan government is offering hundreds of thousands of such citizens alternative urban maintenance jobs, many of which are considered undignified work. In Kibera, one of the largest informal settlements in Nairobi, Abdul Aziz, a driver who lost his job, scoops up plastic bottles, dirty nappies, and garbage from the open sewer, trying his best to dodge the “flying toilets” of human faeces that is swung out from homes while he toils. “It’s disgusting work,” says Aziz, but he recognizes that it’s still better than staying at home, “hungry and jobless” (BBC 2020).

Inserting honour in this equation is perverse. Yet, this social “quality” that somehow people at the margins have found themselves needing to defend and preserve seems to accompany several types of jobs they engage with, such as tailoring, butchering, artisanal work, domestic care, and sanitation.

It is time to let go of honour.

We need to ask ourselves—who benefits from this added layer of self and group degradation in the face of precarity, informality, and misfortune? What are the markers for meaningful labour—is it our payslip, our corporate title, the size of our office, and educational credentials? We need to move the needle from individualistic-centred markers to more inclusive markers with an eye on the triple bottom line—to nurture the self, our community, and our planet. It is time for a decolonial reckoning, redressal, and redistribution of value of the material and immaterial kind if we are to truly be in this

1 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

together. Culture has become a dirty word—a proxy for action and thought that is backward, gendered, colonial, mediaeval, prehistoric. Let us reclaim culture as a critical and creative human resource that can generate solidarity, empathy, and collective action—perhaps then we will have a future in the work we do.

We need to break free from this historically and culturally constructed shackle where individual virtue and vice is dependent on the work we do. No human being should be valued based on their labour; rather, we should value the level of integrity they bring to it, whether as a street sweeper in Bengaluru or a Wall Street executive in New York. Given that human beings can't help but imbibe meaning from their toil, can we move away from a template that devalues us by what we do? Let us fuel an alternative paradigm that centres on the dignity of labour.

As long as honour holds a place in the world of labour, it will always serve as a cancer that eats into the fabric of human dignity.

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22. The Future of Development Innovation and Finance is Feminist¹

Ramona Liberoff

Abstract

The future of finance is feminist. Development finance is funded by people, for the ostensible improvement of economic conditions worldwide. However, it has received little scrutiny and is often unrepresentative in its leadership and opaque in its practices. Citizens should be more conscious and active in determining how this money is spent, and the focus should be on solving systemic issues for the long term.

Keywords: development finance, feminist finance, emerging markets, innovation, climate change, climate justice

Over more than twenty-five years of working in innovation and impact, I came to two conclusions: the first is that our public and international finance system needed significant reform for a more just world. The second is that despite the welcome appearance of female leaders like Christine Lagarde and Kristalina Georgieva, the first women to lead two of the most powerful public finance institutions, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the investment agenda needs to follow at all levels. While both Lagarde and Georgieva have been outspoken about the need to “build back better,” and have mentioned women, low-wage workers, and climate in ways their predecessors did not, they lead large organizations whose working practices and resource allocations do not always align with the ambition or rhetoric at the top.

I started my career in the mid 1990s in corporate innovation. Innovation—an overused word—in this context meant taking a consumer product

¹ A version of this chapter was previously published on the FemLab blog: <https://femlab.co/2021/07/29/future-of-development-innovation-and-finance-is-feminist/>

and figuring out how to price it and market it to more buyers. Fifteen or so years later, I was working with large multinationals and their teams all over the world. Something kept bugging me: the places and the things that needed innovation most weren't getting new solutions or attention, while there was all this brutal competition and stupendous talent busy launching another brand of toothpaste or mobile phone tariff.

I wanted to know who was working on innovations to increase access and lower the cost of affordable energy, clean water, healthcare, education, and all the other things the world needed most. While there were small social innovations or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) units in my clients' companies, they usually had no more than ten people. They would control very little budget directly, amounts less than promotional fees for new shampoo. I also noticed that the majority of decision-makers were men, even though their teams of employees were women, and most expected consumers. Finally, though the companies were global and the workforce international, most people came from the highest, best educated elites—and had never known poverty. It was rare for them to take an interest in making a product more affordable or a business model more inclusive.

In 2010, I left big corporate and went to work for a new kind of company, an "impact business," that delivered an innovation to connect the more than a billion people who did not have access to mobile phones, particularly women, smallholder farmers and merchants, and other excluded or non-urban populations in Africa and Asia.

Given the size of the problem—and the opportunity—I started to get curious about how all these innovations and innovative companies developing solutions to meet fundamental needs get funded. That's when I learnt about development finance: its history, its present, and the fact that it's not doing the job of funding much of what the world needs most.

What is the Definition and History of Development Finance?

Most countries in the Global North, particularly Western Europe, Scandinavia, the United States (US), Canada, and Australia, have had long-standing commitments to provide 0.7 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) towards international development. The history of this target is often aspirational and subject to political whim. There is even an article on most common criticisms at Britannica.²

2 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-aid/Criticism>

There is something strange about previous colonizers giving back a fraction of what they took from their colonies and calling it “aid.”

Leaving aside any political or philosophical challenges about strategy, power, or objectivity in development spending, there is also a very practical one: is the money being spent in the most effective way? Critics like Owen Barder³ have pointed out that the answer is no.

These funds are much more important now than ever before to meet the world’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Development finance money from wealthy countries is supposed to de-risk investment in poorer ones so that private sector money can follow along, which we need to move “billions” (public money) to “trillions” (private money).

There are a few issues with this setup. For a start, development finance money is fundamentally yours and my money from taxes, but citizens rarely have a visibility or a say in how it’s spent. The organizations who administer this budget are often caught between two paradigms: use money to achieve outcomes or use it to achieve financial returns. Development banks often have charters that do not allow for them to take risks. Therefore, the innovative high-growth start-ups go unfunded, while public money invests in what are already good investments, just in geographies less well-served by private investors: bridges or power plants, not an EdTech start-up. Whole sets of the SDGs are underfunded: for instance, landscape restoration, because the business models and established practices of the development banks do not know how to invest in them.

Changing how this works is difficult, as there is little diversity in the development finance talent pool, and few people who challenge how it works from the inside. The management is usually recruited from mainstream finance organizations, is the elite of the population, and is not required to consult diverse voices from the countries in question about what they want. Economic development is seen as a good in itself. While finance is needed to transition the infrastructure of countries in critical areas such as health systems, infrastructure, energy (increasingly, although not yet exclusively renewable), and governance, the process of getting it there is more technocratic than democratic.

Why Should We, as Citizens, Care about Development Finance?

First, it’s our money, raised from the tax base, which, as the recent ProPublica investigation (Kasliwal 2020) shows, comes disproportionately from our

3 <https://www.cgdev.org/expert/owen-barder>

earnings rather than from the wealthy or from businesses. Second, the development budget has often been used as a wrecking ball by the media or political interest without much knowledge about how it is actually being used or how effective it is and without disclosing its numerous benefits to the country. Many “aid” departments have now been folded in under a “trade” department, as in the Australian creation of AusAID⁴ and the United Kingdom’s Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO).⁵ This leaves development finance organizations with less support to figure out how their investments matter beyond financial risk and return.

More than anything, money is power. If we want to develop a new paradigm of how to use power wisely, we need to distinguish between classic, narrow investment logic of risk and return, to a much richer, restorative, and participative kind of finance—one which is respectful of what communities want, and keeps the long-term in mind. This would mean shifting toward investing in regenerative agriculture rather than food processing plants, in climate adaptation rather than energy generation, and in education and skills.

How Can Development Finance Be More Feminist?

The post-COVID-19 recovery gives us an opportunity to re-include voices and perspectives that are often left out of the discussion. Good development finance should serve the citizens and the future over the investors. The benefit of these innovations accrues to us all: with better resilience, countries would avoid conflicts over resources exacerbated by climate change such as water and food security. Greater access to opportunities can be delivered by technology and entrepreneurship. Stronger and more transparent governance of capital markets can strengthen weak states. Financial inclusion and innovation would allow those not in the country’s elite circles access to finance.

And why is this more feminist? At a working session for Finance in Common, feminist finance is defined as “challenging the status quo to rethink systems and unlock possibilities for transformative change that is inclusive and sustainable.”⁶

The feminist future would see more community involvement in the design and deployment of development finance, more visibility and critique

4 <https://www.dfat.gov.au>

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>

6 <https://www.wecf.org/feminist-finance-a-brief-for-the-finance-in-common-summit/>

of the current practice, and more funding for grounded entrepreneurs and innovators whose goal is inclusion.

In Conclusion ...

Whatever finance we provide from public institutions needs to be just, future-oriented, and climate-smart. In the areas of innovative and blended finance (the combination of public and private finance) and social enterprise, the majority of practitioners are female. Maybe it's a coincidence, but I believe those outside the system are best placed to question it and come up with alternatives that work better for more people. Now, we just need the money and the power to follow.

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23. Rethinking a Crippled Society

Soumita Basu

Abstract

Productivity is directly associated with time: how much is produced in a given time period. It's much later that the quality of that product is examined. Efficiency and productivity are celebrated as core values today, particularly at work. And it is through our work, at our workplaces, that we have learnt to recognize our value—and more importantly, to find our identity. Should something as fundamental as identity be left to the narrow gauges of productivity? And how should we look at productivity in today's workplaces?

Keywords: productivity, inclusion, disability, workspaces

“Now, I'm neither productive nor reproductive,” she said with a wry smile, skilfully turning it into a giggle. We were soaking in the warmth of the rare pre-spring sun beside the canals of Den Haag, a city in The Netherlands. It was a spontaneous meeting. We had a lot of respect for each other. What we lacked in chemistry, we made up for in our common quest to find our place in a world we had suddenly become alienated from. Words moved effortlessly as we sat beside each other on the wooden bench, munching on a bag of mixed nuts.

When she suddenly remarked on her productivity, I was staring at the tall, almost barren purple tree across the canal. I missed how the words looked on her. I turned to meet her eyes and found tiredness wrapped in smiles and giggles. A few months ago, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer. She wasn't thinking of death. She was looking for life as she had known it for over four and a half decades. While I had fifteen fewer years to boost, my relationship with life was changing rapidly too. My (then) undiagnosed autoimmune disorder had started ruling much of any conversation.

Unless these conversations were with friends.

Friends bring out the deeper value of our existence. Something we all need to cherish from time to time. Our value in the lives of our loved ones isn't defined. It is sacred territory. This is the single most important thing that brings life to our days. But what about livelihoods? And the distinct identity we draw from our productive avatars? One's "usefulness" is often judged by how productive one is. Finding the space that allows you to be productive becomes imperative for your existence. Yet, for most of us, it is also about existence itself. About the means to survival.

The Value of My Every Hour

Countries with strong social protection programmes for the chronically ill or those with disabilities are very few. While social protection programmes ensure survival, they don't give meaning to it. That can come only when we co-exist and co-create. Having chronic illnesses or disabilities systematically excludes us from having this feeling of contributing. It deprives us of a sense of belonging. Slowly, the spiral of questioning our self-worth begins to grow. At every turn, we ask if we are a "burden."

I had to restart my career in my mid-thirties when I acquired an autoimmune disorder and started to gradually lose my mobility. The more mobility I lost, the less work I got. And finally, I stopped working completely. I had no income, while the medical bills kept piling. I leaned on my family. Anxiety started surfacing. I wasn't worried about the constant chronic bulldozing pain that I experienced every second of every day. I wasn't worried about death either. I was worried about living, about being able to buy my medicines, and putting food in my mouth. I was worried about survival. I was worried and I was guilty. There are not enough words to suggest how guilt can engulf you without any trigger when you feel like a burden, when you cannot financially support your ageing parents. In fact, your illness demands every penny ever saved as a family. Everyone told me I wasn't being rational, especially since my family was so supportive. But it wasn't about my family. It was about me.

My financial independence, my social and professional well-being. It was about me finding space in this world which once seemed my very own. I wanted to contribute as a professional as I was known to, only now I was asked "what *can* you do?" instead of "what do you *want* to do?" And now, the struggle was to not just find a role in an organization, but also physical space. I remember being offered a job, only for the offer to be retracted because they didn't know how to engage with me. They worked on the fourth floor of a

building without any lifts. During my interview process, I was candid about my disability. They were impressed by my experience and the organization's main work was on plurality, diversity, and inclusion. I learnt, working on something didn't necessarily have to mean engaging with it, to live by it.

The world around me was not rational either. It only spoke the language of productivity. It rated people based on a hazy relationship between input and output, where the output is very vaguely defined and the input is usually just reduced to the movement of the hour hand on our clocks. It's completely irrational. Or at least very overpowering because most people usually cheat (often, themselves). In most white-collar jobs, people work unrecorded, unpaid "overtime." News of burnouts have become common stories in any sector. We don't just burn the midnight oil, but often ourselves in the name of passion and dedication. However, when we work a few hours less, our compensation packages get adjusted accordingly. The relationship with our organizations and their employees is guided by mistrust, rather than faith. This mistrust becomes even more pronounced in case of persons with disabilities as there are often ill-founded doubts on their work-related abilities (Bonaccio et al. 2020). The organization-staff relationship is driven by ambition, instead of empathy. Completing the task gains importance over how it is achieved. Often, this alienates people from their organization. It colours the people in monochrome, instead of as multidimensional beings.

The monochromatic lens prefers people who are ambitious, and are willing to do whatever it takes. Accountability is stifled when no one asks, "at what cost?" Ambition itself should be relieved from the narrow clutches of productivity. Ambition is seen through the lens of how much one is willing to work, for how long, and the numbers it brings. These are low bars to set for drivers of ambition. Is your organization ambitious about the mental and emotional well-being of its staff? Does its monthly and annual reviews regularly look at the social well-being of the people it engages? Does it create a safe space? Does it proactively create an ecosystem that helps people be themselves? Is it a space, as Rabindranath Tagore's poem says, "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high"?

Organizations often overlook their responsibility of being a safe space. The place where someone is expected to spend at least a third of their day, should feel safe. Often, we talk about safe spaces from a legal point of harassment. Surely, that is the minimum requirement. Yet, even for this minimum requirement to be fulfilled, workers within the organizations should feel assured that they will be heard without prejudice, and that the organization will act to protect them. This assurance cannot come in a compartmentalized way. It is the result of everyday interactions where

power dynamics are not centrestage but are led by the inclusive values of the organization.

Organizational values are in the written framework, in the policies, the actions, the thoughts of people, and guide the board meetings as well as coffee conversations. A safe place is where the mind can be nourished for better quality work, and the person can be stress-free at work for a better quality life.

Dignity of the employee rests on this assurance of being in a safe space, one which is cooperative, not competitive, and which operates on trust. Often, it is most compromised when the focus remains on achieving organizational goals. Goals that don't include the well-being of people.

This doesn't mean we should be without ambition. We need ambition to grow. It is important even for individuals within the organization. However, we need to be driven by empathy at the core, with ambitions at the periphery, instead of the other way around. A paradigm shift towards redefining our relationship with our organizations and redefining the identity of the organization is imperative to be inclusive. Instead of focusing on linear one-on-one relationships with each individual staff member and the organization, we need to build on organizations as one unit with geometric-networked relationships between individual members. Here, tasks are not assigned to individuals but to teams. So, while the team completes the task, individual members may contribute with ease. There could be a young parent needing to be back home early in the afternoon every day or someone who can work late evenings but needs a three-week break every quarter. The design thinker with spurts of creativity and the focused repetitive organized worker can find this space equally comfortable. Workspaces need to be designed to encourage collaboration, instead of fanning the notion of survival of the fittest.

Disability as a Culture, a Way of Life for All

Being disability-friendly demands a healthy environment. The culture of a place needs to be healthy and friendly for everyone, *before* it can become disability-friendly. In other words, being disability-friendly and inclusive ensures a healthy environment for everyone (Stein 2020). Not physically, but mentally and emotionally too. It is an impossible feat to be disability-friendly for just one person or a few select people. It's a culture, a way of life, not something that can be practised in silos. We need to rethink not only hiring practices, but also our work integration. Organizations truly invested in

inclusion have started to re-engineer their work processes to ensure more talent can participate.

The function of society is to ensure its members operate at their full potential, creating a harmony that would otherwise be unknown. However, when society choreographs its moves to only allow for a chosen few, it is not a healthy society. There are many people who have disabilities. Probably, if we look across the spectrum, we will find more people with disabilities than otherwise. Often, they might not even identify as a person with disabilities. Yet, social structures favour the chosen few, and label others as marginalized. If we look deeply, even if there are people with disabilities, it is the society that's disabled.

Reassessing Worth for an Inclusive Workplace

Our self-worth is silently driven by how useful we feel. I realized I needed to fulfil this existential need of mine. There was one year when I was completely without work; my sense of worth was shaken. I thought of home-makers. But they work at their homes, I thought. It was unpaid labour, but at least there was tangible labour. I couldn't do that either. I felt "neither productive, nor reproductive." I took rescue in the locks of my hair. I cut them to donate to patients of cancer and alopecia. I needed to feel useful. I needed to be part of some story.

Our need to be part of something larger, something more than ourselves, is what drives us. We work best as part of a much bigger whole—be it our families, communities, or workplaces. However, we are not just a simple building block of the whole. It's a many-one relationship that creates this whole. Unfortunately, often in our workspaces, we try to form relationships lined up together to produce the whole, that is, the organization. It's actually a network where the dynamics of one-many and many-many relationships evolve to make an organization, instead of just being a stack of many smaller units. Only the richness of a network can create the ecosystem needed for individuals of all kinds of requirements to thrive.

An inclusive organization can only be possible if we weave all our stories together; where characters don't come in only to push the story of the whole, the organization, forward, but where everyone who is a part of this story also gets their own narratives heard, their own storylines finding ways to move ahead. People not only work and contribute to feel "useful" in an inclusive organization, but they also thrive because the organization also works for them. The business plan and year-on-year plan needs to reflect the growth plan of every individual. How can we periodically evaluate the

fulfilment the organization brings to its people much like how individual contribution towards the growth of the organization is appraised? It's not adequate for organizations to seek a growth plan from its employees but to also support and invest in the individual to achieve this growth.

It is then imperative to see employees as people first, as humans in the most holistic sense: people with families and hobbies, medical issues and natural odd tendencies, special interests and multiple talents. The natural odd tendencies are interesting to note because we all really have them: how prepared is our organization to make an equitable space for introverts and self-paced workers, as well as extroverts and team integrators? Should everyone be equally comfortable working in open spaces or open cubicles under the din of busy voices? What can we do for people who function better in quiet spaces? How can our infrastructure help those with tinnitus, which affects more than twenty per cent of the global population? Are these infrastructures supportive of people with ADHD?¹ Do we all need to function as morning people? Do the night owls end with the raw end of the bargain where their best is either never seen because of the office timings or they are overworked by attending office hours and then working during their naturally preferred time to bring their best on the table? They end up burning both sides and are pushed towards burnout.

It's important that the organization is not just strategizing with the "skills" and "abilities" of its employees but also their natural tendencies, characteristics, disabilities, and specific needs. This becomes even more important for those with certain disabilities or chronic illnesses. There is an unfair burden on them to prove "their worth" in the organization. A friend,² chiselled by her experience of working in the disability sector, sums it up:

I had to prove over and over again as a woman that I'm as good as the men, but only by being better than them. I see the people with disabilities walking the same path—they have to prove they are as good as the non-disabled people by doing the same work, in the same environment, but better and faster. And may the force be with you if you are a woman with disabilities (Personal communication).

Even after proving it all, they are still not paid equally, or more commonly, there are no job offers. The difference starts during the hiring process itself.

1 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a very common condition with ten million cases per year in India.

2 Name has been withheld to protect identity.

While all others are asked, “What do you *want* to do and where do you see yourself in the future?” people with disabilities are asked, “What *can* you do?” Ever so silently, their desires are buried. For good. A paradigm shift is needed to gradually displace a crippled society by an empowered one. This shift would be from a position of power where we want to hire from a diverse population to enhance their quality of life to a position of collaboration and symbiosis, because it will enrich us. It is a shift from a space of giving as charity to a space where the giving is derived from cooperation and oneness. These spaces are not just about finding our value through our contribution, but being valuable for who we are.

The dreams, abilities, and specific needs of every individual need to be understood and mapped in the organization. Individuals of an inclusive organization are not pieces of a puzzle coming together to complete the bigger picture. They are pieces of a Lego set—of varied sizes, colours, shapes, and a world of possibilities.

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Conclusion: Defining FemWork for Labour Futures

Payal Arora, Usha Raman, & René König

Abstract

This essay introduces the notion of “FemWork” as an ongoing, reflexive, and collective practice around labour to recentre the marginalized with regards to social and planetary well-being. This demands a realignment of how work and workers are valued. It makes the case that the pathway to feminist labouring comes in the form of inclusive design, care-based networks, collective governance, and empathetic vision.

Keywords: women, tech, data, work, feminism

The Case for FemWork

Designing with women at the centre is on the rise. It has become market-worthy. In the last few years, “FemTech” or “female technology” has expanded exponentially (Faramarzi 2019). In 2025, the global FemTech industry is predicted to be valued at \$50 billion.¹ McKinsey (2022) calls this phenomenon “the dawn of the FemTech revolution.” *The Guardian* (Faramarzi 2019), among other media sources, sees this as a “source of good,” a feminist shift in tech innovation. Women entrepreneurs are leveraging this critical global momentum by organizing themselves, networking and partnering with one another, and doubling down on the “designing for women by women” wave.

Venture capitalists are opening their wallets and betting generously on FemTech. Neha Mehta, the founder of FemTech Partners, an organization started in 2019 in Singapore and Amsterdam, argues that it is time to break

¹ <https://ww2.frost.com/frost-perspectives/femtechttime-digital-revolution-womens-health-market/>

the barriers between capital and care, where FemTech needs to align with FinTech:

It was very clear that there was not great participation in general from women across the various sectors, that there weren't many female founders of fintech companies and that, when there were, achieving the funding to take those businesses or innovations forward was also more challenging for women than it was for their male counterparts. That was really the point at which I thought it time to take the plunge, to go solo, and to really try to do what I felt was right and have a wider impact on women and their opportunities (High 2020).

The enthusiasm is understandable. The prototype user has long been male, young, and almost always from the Anglo-Saxon context. Caroline Criado Perez, in her book, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* argues that women have systematically been neglected in market research based on “the assumption that male bodies can represent humanity as a whole” (Perez 2019, 167). Today, the market sees opportunity in diversity. Applications are being built on the premise that there is a need to differentiate user groups and personalize design. The universalist approach gives way to a contextual approach based on, in the case of FemTech, women's needs, concerns, aspirations, and specific gender issues of mental, physical, and spiritual well-being.

This momentum has seeped across work sectors, given the omnipresence of digital media in our everyday lives. The ride-hailing sector asks questions of how to best cater to women customers to optimize safety. The healthcare sector looks to plug the data gaps on women-specific healthcare issues in fertility, menstruation, pregnancy, sexual, and gynecological health. The artisanal sector seeks to build networks to connect, help, and empower women on e-commerce platforms. While these efforts are commendable, we make the case that the underlying logic of such initiatives need a rethink if we are to go beyond the convenience of quick fix solutions to complex problems.

FemTech to FemWork

We need to recalibrate the underlying assumptions on design values, networks of engagement, socio-technical governance, and global visions to ensure feminist labour futures. This demands sidelining tools, gadgets,

devices, wearables, and apps for market-based consumption solutions to address human-centred problems. The fact is that FemTech as an industry is increasingly becoming a biometric monitoring economy (Brown 2021). Under the guise of wellness programmes, diversity optimization, and accountability in remote work, workplaces have become surveillance regimes, seamlessly collecting, tracking, and computing vast amounts of workers' data that can have the reverse effect, particularly on marginalized workers.

Legal scholar Elizabeth Brown (2021) argues that this can create an amplified threat to women workers as FemTech increases the likelihood of gender discrimination by providing more specific types of information on women's than men's bodies to employers and health data clearinghouses, and this data gets processed through often gender-biased algorithmic systems, which can escalate data harms. Ethicists Tereza Hendl and Bianca Jansky make a convincing case for concern, having analysed the rhetoric around these apps that has spawned this movement:

The discourse of empowerment promoted through the majority of the apps is grounded in narrow, exclusionary and oppressive conceptualisations of normative embodiment, gender and sexuality and involves epistemic injustice and elements of rape culture, which seriously undermines the liberational tales. We conclude that the troubling discourse of apps raises urgent questions about the content, empowering potential and effects of apps on users' health and wellbeing (Hendl and Jansky 2021, 31).

We propose to pivot away from the technocratic, datafied, individualistic, and market orientation that comes with the world of FemTech. While tech can be catalysts for change, they are rarely the prime cause of it. It is human resistance, resilience, and commitment to change that fosters a future worth living. Instead, we suggest a more expansive and holistic feminist approach to the future of work and tech in what we term as "FemWork"—a feminist approach to work. After all, tech *is* work—it is not an objective entity but a subjective materialization of human endeavour. There is no tech without work. By replacing "tech" with "work" in this popular term, we force a sustained recognition and a just reconciliation of invisible, informal, and collective labour that is often absent in the framing of FemTech. From the exploitative labour that goes into the mining of conflict minerals in Congo to build our phones, to the ongoing labour of millions of global gig workers to keep an app alive, an artefact is fuelled by sweat.

The liberal feminist self-care gives way to a decolonial feminist group-care. Women and other marginalized groups are not mere recipients of

change. In our FemWork model, they are leaders of change. We shift the face of the everyday entrepreneur, innovator, and pioneer of creative work practices from Silicon Valley women leaders to cooperatives and collectives that organize themselves in ways to find opportunity, make a living, support one another, and share tactics of survival, pleasure, joy, and even flourishing. We recentre aspirational goals to produce dignified work, social well-being, and inclusive sustainability to bridge environmental, social, and design justice.

To get tech to work for the good of society, it requires meaningful policy reform, inclusive design interventions, institutional building, legal enforcement, building cooperatives, critical upskilling, and socio-cultural shifts. This is an ongoing and laborious effort. Work is rarely time-bound nor always individual-centred. We readily accept that the digital is the air we breathe, that tech is omnipresent, that our social lives are datafied. We argue, however, that it is work that is continuous, ever-present, a slow churning wheel in motion, keeping us tethered as cogs in the machine. We labour outside the confines of the work week, the factory hours, beyond the assigned tasks. While a job is time-bound, we humans are bound by the time we put into producing “worth”—and that benchmark appears to move steadily downwards with the race to the bottom. We appear to face an inflation of time. Moreover, in the digital age, we continuously produce, through our everyday enactments with platforms, with each other when online, value for corporations and sometimes for ourselves and for each other.

Nations, organizations, families—their well-being rests not just on functional efficacy but on ongoing synergies that infuse compassion and care into the equation to make a system work. The worth of our future will be determined by how we value ourselves, each other, and our planet, and how these values translate to meaningful action.

FemWork can be defined as ongoing, reflexive, and collective practices around labour to recentre the marginalized in alignment with social and planetary well-being. This demands a realignment of how work and workers are valued. The pathway to feminist labouring comes in the form of inclusive design, care-based networks, collective governance, and empathetic vision.

Designing Pathways to Inclusive Labour

Much labour goes into architecting and sustaining inclusion in design systems. Energy goes into identifying marginalized groups and when possible, co-designing with them to mitigate vulnerabilities, and enhancing

aspirational goals in design choices. Participatory design can be useful to ensure there is a feedback loop for the design to be responsive and just, especially for those at the margins. However, co-design has its limits. It puts the onus on the shoulders of those already weighed down by work. It burdens workers who are now supposed to also strive and help architect such values while already in precarious situations. The burden to facilitate progress should not be on their shoulders, at least not primarily. Good design needs to be informed not just from the voices below, but also by ethical values, and well-established guidelines for fair work (Graham et al. 2020). We recognize that many vulnerable groups may be non-users, indirect users, or limited and intermittent users. Few vulnerable groups enjoy the freedoms of choice, self-expression, self-management, and ownership of their everyday lives within the socio-technical designs that are available to them.

In patriarchal societies for example, women's digital presence and work are tied closely to familial surveillance and gender norms. This requires careful crafting of familial cooperation and compliance to carve spaces of freedom for them. In such cases, user groups are not individual but family units. Professionalism can be the new political, for instance, as women make the case to enter the digital world for work and not play. Once in, they may labour at chipping away the confining structures, and potentially expanding their networks and capacities for leisure, pleasure, joy, solidarity, and self-actualization. Marginalized groups often don't have access or ownership to what they produce. FemWork is geared to realign this propertied equilibrium and enable access for transparency, self and community agency, and as a right in itself. This should become default by design. From "prosumer" (producer + consumer) or "produser" (producer + user) (Bruns 2009), we propose the paradigm shift of the femworker (feminism + worker) who can enjoy the fruits of fair work and dignified labour.

We recognize that inclusion is a fraught concept but a necessary value. Diversity is a critical resource but a continued challenge. Questions abound: Is there a prototype user? Do all voices count equally, and if so, does one design for everyone? In this datafied world, can inclusion lead to further extraction, exploitation, and exclusion of those already at the margins of power? Can inclusive and universal values become aligned?

Inclusive design has evolved as a discipline and field. Inclusive design in the seventies was synonymous with universal design with a focus on accessibility for groups with disabilities. The "father" of this field, Ronald Mace, defined this concept as "designing all products and the built environment to be aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless

of their age, ability, or status in life.”² Universalist design practitioners would insist that including perspectives of disabled groups is about “good design” for all users, not the particular needs of disabled users (Hamraie 2015). Today, universal approaches sit uncomfortably with diversity and intersectionality and have pushed the field towards areas of use that are equitable, flexible, simple, intuitive, low effort, and sustainable.

FemWork advocates taking design beyond the technical interventions and immersing into the socio-digital life worlds beyond the normative contexts of privilege. This cannot be a tourist gaze of the everyday work from below but a genuine engagement that translates to meaningful action. We need to do the painstaking job of navigating through these seemingly confounding challenges in a systemic manner and with vested stakeholders. We build on the psychologist Bernardo Ferdman’s view of inclusion as a multilevel system and set of practices that,

[...] spans and connects macro, meso, and micro processes and contexts, ranging from societal and organizational ideologies, values, policies, and practices, to leadership models and practices and group norms and climates, to interpersonal behavior and individual experiences of inclusion. Two people referring to inclusion, then, could be thinking about diversity dynamics at any, some, or all these levels of analysis (Ferdman 2017, 239).

Ferdman argues that only when we welcome the “contradictions inherent in inclusion” would we become “equipped to engage and address diversity dynamics in organizations and society as well as the ongoing work of expanding social equality in ways that are at once realistic and more effective” (2017, 259).

This demands accepting that paradox is intrinsic to inclusion. To mitigate inequality, we need to disrupt supposed binaries or paradoxes in our approach on labouring through and with platforms—flexibility and formality, individual and collective, standardized and localized—which are not diametrically opposite; instead, can be complementary to the pathway on inclusive work.

Questions We Ask of the Future of Work

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused much discussion on how to recover and reset our systems. What policies do governments need to prioritize for an inclusive recovery? Can we go back to the old normal?

2 Center for Inclusive Design. <https://centreforinclusivedesign.org.au/>

Questions of recovery are on many minds. Recovery connotes a “return to”—however, for workers at the margins, they need a “moving from,” which demands a reconstituting of patriarchal relations through concrete measures for change at a legal, institutional, and socio-technical level. For instance, while the West introspects about the future of remote work in relation to community culture, work-life balance, and the great resignation in demand for more meaningful work, many informal labour groups have long been remote, as in hidden from our imagination, uncaptured by our gross domestic product (GDP), and silent and silenced in their domestic spheres.

Often this means recognizing and accommodating the challenges of workers’ life-worlds, many of which are intangible and difficult to quantify. While standardization across institutions, platforms, and sectors matter for a cooperative and collective recovery, a case needs to be made for decentralization. We need to give real power to local and regional intermediaries, autonomy and voice to civic actors to serve as accountability forces for such power, and most importantly, to make visible and vocal the marginalized majority who needs to be at the forefront of recovery efforts.

This book was born during the nascent days of the pandemic. The pandemic has undoubtedly been a radical disruptor of thought and action in many sectors; the way we see ourselves in relation to others in our families, in our community, in the world. Yet, we would be naïve to dismiss the possibility of relapse. Status quo doubles down as nostalgia for the simpler days, at least to those who are on the consumption end of the supply chain. The pandemic, the climate crisis, and now the Ukraine war have disrupted supply chains around the world, with companies and countries panicking.

How do we reduce the vulnerability of our value chains? How can we become more autonomous and self-reliant as organizations and companies and even nations? Is going local the answer to these global disruptions?

There seems to be broad consensus among these stakeholders that our global systems are “broken,” “incredibly vulnerable,” and “fragile” (Arora 2020). However, when we scratch the surface, the empathy is directed towards the consumer and the top of the value chain, of the interrupted flows of products and services to often Global North markets. Vulnerability equates to hyper-dependencies of multinational organizations on markets outside the West. Remedies stay close to reassessing outsourcing inventories, hoarding practices, and re-evaluating cost-efficiencies. Where diversification was the answer to reduce fragility, today it could be a consolidation of networks of ideological alignment. The World Economic Forum claims this may be “the key to building stronger, smarter supply chains and ensuring a lasting recovery” (Lin and Lanng 2020). Fragility refers to the numerous

shocks the system had to absorb from the supply side. Resetting the system surrounds these concerns.

When we speak about consumption, we quickly lapse into the world of customers. When we speak of production, it triggers panic on supply scarcity and disruption. The former is humanized, and the latter is not. FemWork contributes to building a feminist value chain where attention is pivoted to the bottom of the supply chain upheld by millions of workers. We shift focus from consumption to the production end where empathy should reside. At the bottom of the pyramid, life has been radically disrupted. From the over-labouring of delivery workers, nurses, and sanitation workers to the under-labouring of millions who lost their jobs, their homes, their hopes for an urban life as they retreated to their rural enclaves, work in its presence/absence has been an intense instrument of disruption. The millions of unpaid and underpaid garment workers in Bangladesh to the Amazon warehouse staff working overtime are the true face of vulnerability.

Fragility is the crippling precarity that takes a toll on the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of these people. To reset the system, we need to reimagine these transnational and cross-sectoral networks less as chains, pipelines, supply channels and more as human interdependencies for mutual flourishing. Work needs to go into building solidarity between the opposing ends of these networks. There is a case to be made to revive the ethos of the economist E. F. Schumacher's (2011) "small is beautiful" mantra, promoting "enoughness," appreciating both human needs and limitations, and appropriate use of technology. The feminist lens to the future of work could actually lead to more objectivity by building more robust networks, by taking the diversity of human experiences seriously. This is also a call for qualitative methodology which develops a deeper understanding of working conditions instead of creating simplified "facts" through data analytics based on a limited representation of voices online. There is nothing objective about reducing infrastructures and processes to objects. Not centring humans in assessments will inevitably lead to wrong conclusions.

That would be a good starting point to reset the world of work.

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The future of work is at the centre of debates related to the emerging digital society. Concerns range from the inclusion, equity, and dignity of those at the far end of the value chain, who participate on and off platforms, often in the shadows, invisible to policymakers, designers, and consumers. Precarity and informality characterize this largely female workforce, across sectors ranging from artisanal work to salon services to ride-hailing and construction. A feminist reimagining of the futures of work—what we term as “FemWork”—is the need of the day and should manifest in multiple and various forms, placing the worker at the core and drawing on her experiences, aspirations, and realities. This volume offers grounded insights from academic, activist, legal, development, and design perspectives that can help us think through these inclusive futures and possibly create digital, social, and governance infrastructures of work that are fairer and more meaningful.

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“To bring a world of just and equitable work into being, we need truly inclusive visions and strategies. This powerful book deploys a feminist lens to do just that from a diverse range of perspectives.” – Mark Graham, Professor at Oxford Internet Institute & Founder of Fairwork Foundation

“For over a century, feminism has fought for women’s rightful, equal place in economies and societies. This thoughtfully conceived, keenly perceptive, and accessibly written book continues the quest, capturing the modern-day struggle of women’s working lives in a digital world. A must-read for anyone interested in promoting more equitable and inclusive labour markets—today and in the future.” – Sabina Dewan, President & Executive Director, JustJobs Network

