A paradigm-gone-wrong

A feminist digital future cannot be achieved by gender inclusion into an oppressive digital order that, in fact, needs to be completely overhauled

The 67th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was held last month. At the session, the UN Member States adopted a set of agreed conclusions pledging their commitment to the meaningful inclusion of women and girls in the emerging digital paradigm. The policy rhetoric at the CSW has been dominated by exhortations to promote public and private sector investments to bridge the digital gender divide, end gender-based violence in the digital context and invest in gender-equitable STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and gender-inclusive innovation ecosystems. The key to a digital future that works for women and girls everywhere is seen to be dependent on effectively addressing gendered exclusions in Internet access and use and overcoming inter-sectional bias and discrimination in techno-design. But does this perspective fully capture the feminist digital future we want? Or would it only promote women's inclusion into an oppressive digital order that, in fact, needs to be completely overhauled?

Co-option into an oppressive digital order

It is evident that the current digital paradigm created by capitalism has established a political and economic regime whose structures are hostile to the pursuit of gender justice. The planet-wide domination of the capitalist platform firm has universalised the business logic of data extractivism across all segments of the economy, leading to the consolidation of inter-class and inter-country inequality. Unsurprisingly, women from socio-economic marginal locations in the Global South have been disproportionately affected and condemned to a future of precarity and impoverishment. Hard-won gains of the women's movement in addressing gender gaps in pay and status are at risk of being rolled back in the economic transformation catalysed by intelligent automation. The data economy dominated by Big Tech has proven to be

exploitative, exclusionary and environmentally unsustainable.

And the gamification of social and civic interactions in the click-bait online economy has led to the proliferation of sexist hate, gender-trolling and gendered disinformation. Women's human right to public participation has ended up as collateral damage in the path of algorithmic virality.

Calling for women's inclusion into this paradigm-gone-wrong only results in their co-option into this oppressive digital order. Only by building a new vision of structural transformation to fix this broken digitality and its intersectional gender inequalities can we begin to build a feminist digital future. The first battle, as always, is one of sketching new visions of *lifeworlds* and social institutions that enable us to reclaim our digital human condition from the juggernaut of digital capitalism.

Concrete demands from the Global South

To begin with, the digital sociality that we aspire towards is one of a pluralistic openness where connections enabled by the Internet result in feminist emancipation, empowering self-expression and serendipitous solidarity – a far cry from the current status-quoist openness where freedom of expression ends up being weaponised by the majority for dominating social discourses and intimidating minorities. Secondly, we seek a new global digital economy and society that furthers the autonomy of work and life, universal social security, economies based on social and solidarity models, and central participation of women and girls to shape the digital paradigm. These are freedoms that are critical for equitable and secure societies. And last but not least, we want a new global digital economic order where the data sovereignty of all peoples is respected as an integral element of their right to development. Only then can we permanently eradicate the neo-colonial tendencies of the data and AI economy controlled by transnational platform firms.

To actually make this feminist dream a reality, a series of changes to the current global digital regime are necessary.

At the multilateral level, we urgently need a binding global governance framework for a gender-just digital society and economy with concrete commitments by states and transnational corporations to advance women's rights. System-wide guidance on human rights due diligence and impact assessments for women's digital rights must be created for the specific context of virtual business operations of transnational

enterprises, with the involvement of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. For this to work, compliance with these standards must be made mandatory.

We also need a new global social contract that makes a dramatic departure from profit-driven and economic perspectives on development. The unsustainable costs of subordinating society and nature to the dominant digital paradigm are borne disproportionately by women in the Global South (such as the risks to health and life stemming from cobalt mining triggered by the digital rush). Fixing this calls for transforming our entire global system — harmonising multilateral policies on development financing, digital trade, taxation, intellectual property regimes and labour rights in digital value chains, just to name a few. All these changes should be motivated by the need to ensure the promotion of political and economic sovereignty for all nations and peoples which go hand in hand with creating digital economy pathways compatible with gender justice and ecological justice.

We need to initiate a treaty process on digital human rights that articulates the nature of individual and collective autonomy in the epoch of data and AI as well as the right to development for an equitable international data order.

Lastly, the current multistakeholder model of digital governance enshrined in the UN system is unlikely to deliver on a people-centred democratic governance model for the Internet and data commons, given the de facto primacy that transnational corporations have in these spaces and the ways in which they influence policy and its politics through their power and might. To address this deficit, we need to work towards a global digital constitutionalism that effectively lays down a governance model for the knowledge commons of the Internet and data resources. We need to initiate a treaty process on digital human rights that articulates the nature of individual and collective autonomy (including protection from state excess and corporate impunity) in the epoch of data and AI as well as the right to development for an equitable international data order (echoing UNCTAD's call).

This new data governance approach will recognise aggregate data resources as a knowledge commons – the aggregate social knowledge continually co-generated by individuals in their networked socio-environmental interactions. In this view, when data is extracted from natural and social spaces, the communities to whom those spaces belong

have a prior claim in determining which data will be extracted (and which will not) as well as the end uses of their aggregate data. State parties must respect the data sovereignty of communities as part of their right to development. Community resource governance frameworks for the natural resource commons, such as the Nagoya Protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity, can provide a cue for the evolution of an appropriate governance regime to enforce such collective data rights – giving women their rightful place as stewards of such collectives.

A feminist digital future cannot be achieved through calls for gender inclusion into a digitally-enabled 'trickle-down' model of neoliberal economic development – the poisoned pie that Southern feminists have long rejected. It is not about co-option into the data matrix; instead, it is about re-designing digital economy and society end-to-end to enable the meaningful participation of those who are furthest behind first; designing for inclusive political, social and economic citizenship that leaves no one behind.

The full charter of feminist demands from the Global South co-authored by Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami from a synthesis of the regional consultations convened by IT for Change and FES can be accessed here.



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