A FEMINIST MANIFESTO FOR DIGITAL LIFE

Issues We Must Keep in Mind

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1. The intelligence that feminist wisdom must confront

The digital revolution is not what it was even a decade ago. Feminists must now contend with a new architecture of the space of flows arising from the datafication of life and the internet of things (IoT). The digital revolution's impulse is to drive globalised capitalism onto a new frontier of value creation and distribution.

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

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

Clearly, the 'digital' as the new techno-paradigm seems to be colinear with a deeper, disconcerting trend for gender justice, especially in the developing world. Take the case of China which may have risen to the top of the heap in the digital economy, intra-country inequality and political participation has been worsening.[2]

At the centre of the debate on inequality is the new transnational corporation, the 'superstar' firm with the wherewithal to extract and control digital intelligence. Things in the global economy proceed from two ends. One, where digital companies crossover into core economic sectors: Alibaba acquired China's leading milk importer in 2018 and set up a blockchain based system between New Zealand and China in 2019, branching out into agriculture and dairy.

Similarly, Google has entered the pharma industry (Google's pharmaceutical division happens to be led by the former head of GlaxoSmithKline's global vaccine business). From the other side, traditional companies – giants in traditional economic sectors – have sought to pool their data advantage. For instance, Bayer's acquisition of Monsanto, is aimed at expanding its data footprint, and thereby, control over input markets. The age of intelligence is thus proving to be the age of centralisation, consolidation and monopolisation of the market economy through what is popularly referred to as the platform business model.

Platforms are critical digital infrastructures that serve as new ecosystems for social and economic interactions, fostering connections between producers, consumers, suppliers, workers and even IoT devices, optimising data of these member nodes to extract digital intelligence for market power. The success of platform owners is predicated on the ability to lock in actors into these ecosystems so that more and more data can be extracted.

The model is completely pivoted on angel investors and venture capitalists willing to support years

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of cash burn before a firm is able to attract a significant base of users, attain a monopolistic position, and then monetise its user data. As the response to the Uber IPO demonstrates, public equity markets are hesitant to embrace this model enthusiastically. It is the likes of private equity funds such as Softbank's vision fund – whose investment portfolio of over $70 billion is primarily with futuristic technology companies – that are able to underwrite this model.[3]

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

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

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

a. Feminisation and precarity in the digital economy

The material labour that underpins digital capitalism is feminised, racialised and globalised. From the unregulated mining of rare earth minerals in Africa, to the mobile chip factories in China that make phones, women from the Global South service the digital economy at huge risks to their health. On-demand labour platforms also reflect a gendered and racialised subordination of low-income workers, the unemployed, and the unemployable.

Across the board, labour is feminised, "made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day".[5] Platform models are also reorganising agriculture. Smart farming or precision agriculture threatens the household livelihoods backbone carefully managed by women over the centuries, across the countries of the Global South. E-commerce platforms and their forays into supply chains (such as the acquisition of dairy farms in New Zealand by Alibaba) and the investments of venture capital wings of giant agri-business companies into digital platforms for small-size farms are a route to end-to-end monopolisation of cross-border agricultural supply chains for farm-to-fork consolidation.

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

b. Digital sociality and gender discourses

In the neoliberal, quasi-publics of social media and social networking platforms, profits of platform owners are dependent on their ability to draw users, hook them to the platform, mine user behavioural data and game user engagement with content. Emerging new media cultures have significant implications for the everyday operations of gender power. Selfies and evaluative photo commentary that are characteristic of self-documentation trends, while holding the potential to further women's sexual expression, are nevertheless entrenched in a male dominated visual culture that promotes hyper feminine female subjectivity.

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

Cultures of hyper masculinity and vigilantism result in a regression to gender conservatism, with young women, the born digital

generation, resorting to self-policing.[6] Despite the many feminist counter publics and counter-narratives, public debate and deliberation are hostage to the sexist and misogynistic narratives that go viral. Recent research in Brazil on Facebook during the International Women's Day reveals that though there was more feminist content (in terms of volume), misogynistic content had greater reach.[7]

Virality also means that only certain brands of political mobilisation and protest can benefit from the Internet, the ones that fit the neoliberal playbook of empowerment as a depoliticised 'choice politics' of freedom and enterprise. As activist Nadine Moawad observes in her caution to queer feminism in the South, the possibility for diverse sexual and gender profiles on social media platforms must be recognised as Silicon Valley's version of sexual liberation politics, an electronic continuation of credit card companies funding gay parades and pride marches.[8]

Mass and targeted state surveillance today is based on several interdependent gendered, racialised, and sexualised modes that have profound implications for women's experiences of citizenship.[9] Thanks to the digital surveillance net that the Chinese state has built in partnership with over 1000 AI companies, Uighur women's social media behaviour in the Muslim dominated Xinjiang provinces is tracked constantly, in a blatant violation of their cultural and family rights. Indications of religious piety – such as photos of women in veils or the use of prayer terms – are marked as high-risk behaviour indicative of religious extremism/ethnic separatism. Women can also find themselves penalised for merely getting in touch with relatives who have been marked as 'dissidents' by the authorities.

Sexual minorities and gender non-conforming individuals also find themselves at the risk of being subject to gender policing by the patriarchal state. In Malaysia, the national digital ID number assigned to individuals is coded for birth sex, and individuals with gender dysphoria can be persecuted by the Sharia police if their gender expression does not match the dominant norm.[10] Data surveillance also enables new forms of population management, extending the control that states have historically exercised over women's fertility and reproductive behaviour. In Latin America, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) activists have highlighted how states use social media surveillance to crackdown on feminist groups supporting women's access to safe abortion.[11] In India, a few proposals have been floated in policy circles about linking the national citizen identification number to the mother and child tracking system maintained by public health clinics to deter sex-selective abortion.[12] This could lead to blatant transgressions into the bodily privacy of women under the guise of 'public interest'.

3. Gender implications of the ongoing intelligencification of sociality

The intelligence economy has devastating impacts on the environment. Global data centre web servers, such as those operated by Google and Facebook, contribute to two percent of global greenhouse emissions, an amount equivalent to emissions generated by global aviation. Comparative studies of online and traditional retail suggest that in 'last mile delivery,' online shoppers may be expending far more carbon per transaction than their in-store counterparts. The food delivery sector has an enormous ecological footprint.

As per a 2018 study,[13] door-to-door food delivery in China accounted for nearly an eightfold jump in packaging waste in just two years, from 0.2 million tonnes (2015) to 1.5 million tonnes (2017). This has coincided with the exponential growth of the sector in the country, where the number of customers using food-delivery platforms has gone up from zero in 2009 (when the first delivery app (Ele.me) appeared) to nearly half the population of internet users (406 million), by the end of 2018. Toxic e-waste, the detritus

of the network economy, has a global grey market that functions in flagrant violation of the Basel Convention.

The big picture is indeed bleak. But this is not the moment for paralysis or pessimism. Resistance to the dominant system is emerging, slowly, but surely. Across the political spectrum, Americans are eager to see the breaking up of Big Tech.[14] The Silicon Valley tech community has come out to protest against AI contracts of Big Tech with the military establishment of the US. The competition commission of the EU has taken bold steps in taxation of transnational digital corporations. And, in the past couple of years, trade justice, gender justice and labour justice movements have been coming together to protest the co-option and subversion of women's digital empowerment agenda in trade negotiations by the US and its allies.[15]

There are also strong critiques against the corporate capture of the global multilateral system through partnerships, including in the name of digital cooperation.[16] In the quest for reclaiming a new feminist economics, alternative platform models are being explored in favour of a new 'small is beautiful' economy founded on a reverence for the living human labour of care, solidarity and social reciprocity and respect for the natural world.[17] Feminists have used sousveillance (digital surveillance from below) in LGBTQI communities to create crowds-sourced maps of violence against queer people.[18]

4. A new manifesto for feminism in digital times

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

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

a. A global governance framework for data

Given that data may be seen as an extension of the self, the end product of affective labour, a productive resource or the wealth of a community, a simplistic solution for data governance will not work. Also, as argued, there is a prior question to contend with about the limits of datafication and the no-go zones where data markets may not be allowed to operate under any circumstance.

Economic development and gender equity cannot be unhinged. Therefore, data governance frameworks need to pay particular attention to development as a localised and embedded endeavour. An international agreement can recognise and validate the territorial sovereignty of nation-states to govern the data of their citizens/the data generated in their territories, and take necessary local action for women's empowerment. This is an integral part of the state's right and duty of development to their women citizenry.

b. Platform responsibility towards women's human rights

To ensure free speech and freedom from violence for women in the digitally-mediated public sphere, it is time to shift from ideas of 'intermediary liability' to a new discourse on platform responsibility. The corporations controlling the discourse today need to be held accountable for their 'duty of care' to their users. One important part of this task is to ensure that in content oversight and AI ethics boards of

Big Tech companies, women's human rights are seen as a non-negotiable bottom line.

c. A new social contract as if women matter

The digital economy requires that the state can regulate transnational digital capital, redraw the social contract to protect women workers and provide the care infrastructure that is integral to closing gender gaps in the labour market. The provisioning of digital public goods – platform cooperatives for women's organisations, data commons and AI for women's empowerment – is an important measure to provide the impetus for women's participation in the digital society and economy.[19] Social and Solidarity Economy platform models are urgently needed to reclaim a feminist economics for the digital age.

Note: This article is based on the excerpts of a submission paper to the UN Women Experts Group Meeting, 25-26 September 2019

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