

FEMINIST DIGITAL ECONOMY WORKSHOP

Report

Women are absent in the production of technology, and marginalised in platform marketplaces

Access is a necessary but not sufficient condition for gender-inclusive digital economies

Flawed multistakeholder cultures of digital governance - who is at the table?

The gender digital divide is a representational divide in Big Data

Online gender-based violence has a chilling effect and costs for political and economic participation

Environmental costs of digital economy is a feminist issue

Inclusion in connectivity is inclusion as a data point in the matrix of digital capital - the paradox!

Lens:
Decoloniality as MORE than a buzzword

Lens:
Intersectionality - we are NOT 'equally unequal'

Lens:
Gender equality should NOT be a decoy for 'cut copy paste' of digital policy from North

Lens:
We need to move beyond the securitisation discourse in digital governance

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1. Introduction

Research ICT Africa (RIA) together with IT for Change and Freidrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) hosted a Feminist Digital Economy workshop online on 13 and 14 December 2022 in an effort to collect region-specific input for the 2023 UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67). The workshop, which focused on sub-Saharan Africa, was part of discussions held by IT for Change and FES that took place during 2022 in different parts of the world.

The workshop brought together more than 30 participants from across the region, including from both Francophone and Anglophone countries, providing diverse input from stakeholders from academia, government, the private sector, and civil society. The workshop sessions ensured the active engagement of participants using a combination of panel and breakaway group discussions.

The workshop was part of a collaborative project between IT for Change and FES to conceptualise a feminist vision for digitalising economies, leading to a global campaign for innovation and technological change. In 2022 they brought together a global working group of feminists from across different regions to discuss what they referred to as “*the real deal*, what feminists want in the digital economy”. Prior to the Africa workshop, similar regional dialogues had been held in Asia, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the European regions.

As IT for Change has noted, automation and artificial intelligence (AI) have been presented as having the potential to end global poverty and facilitate inclusion, which will be beneficial to women. However, there is growing evidence of an increasing concentration of ownership and control in global digital economies characterised by data accumulation and highly extractive practices that disproportionately harm women. To reclaim a feminist vision of our digital future, a roadmap for feminist action was put in place focusing on three prongs: reclaiming digital infrastructure and redesigning it from a feminist standpoint; big tech accountability for a failure to protect the rights of women; and addressing the democratic governance deficit in the digital order. Besides providing input for CSW67, this report, which seeks to capture the main issues arising from the two-day engagement, will feed into the global campaign being launched by IT for Change and FES.

2. Summary of Key Workshop Discussions

Global Context

In providing a wider context for the workshop, **IT for Change’s Nandini Chami** recounted how FES came together with IT for Change to convene a global working group across different regions to talk about the deal that feminist want for the digital economy and what it means to conceptualise and design the digital economy design from the standpoint of gender and development justice. Nandini pointed out how the mainstream policy narrative tends to be one-sided, emphasising the promises of technology and connectivity, how emerging technologies and automation will end global poverty, and how women will be able to pursue roads of upward mobility. However what lies beneath this is actually evidence of a

paradigm gone wrong. She explained that the trajectories of the global economy are controlled by forces of capitalism, run by big tech corporations and the ceaseless accumulation of data, extractivist practices that have resulted in the control of global value chains. Women are the most affected and left behind in this. Nandini prompted the audience to think beyond connectivity when talking about feminist digital infrastructure: How to reclaim the power of data, cloud, and AI infrastructure for social solidarity, to support women's enterprises and cooperatives, and for basic accountability on women's rights.

An African agenda

Locating the global initiative in the African context, **RIA's Dr Alison Gillwald** stressed the need for a unified and coherent African narrative in framing the 'digital economy we want'. She noted the development of continental policies, specifically the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy and Data Policy Frameworks, that will be the underpinnings of the digital economy in the region. She highlighted that the harms brought about by advanced technologies could only be mitigated through regional and international solidarity, global cooperation and multilateralism.

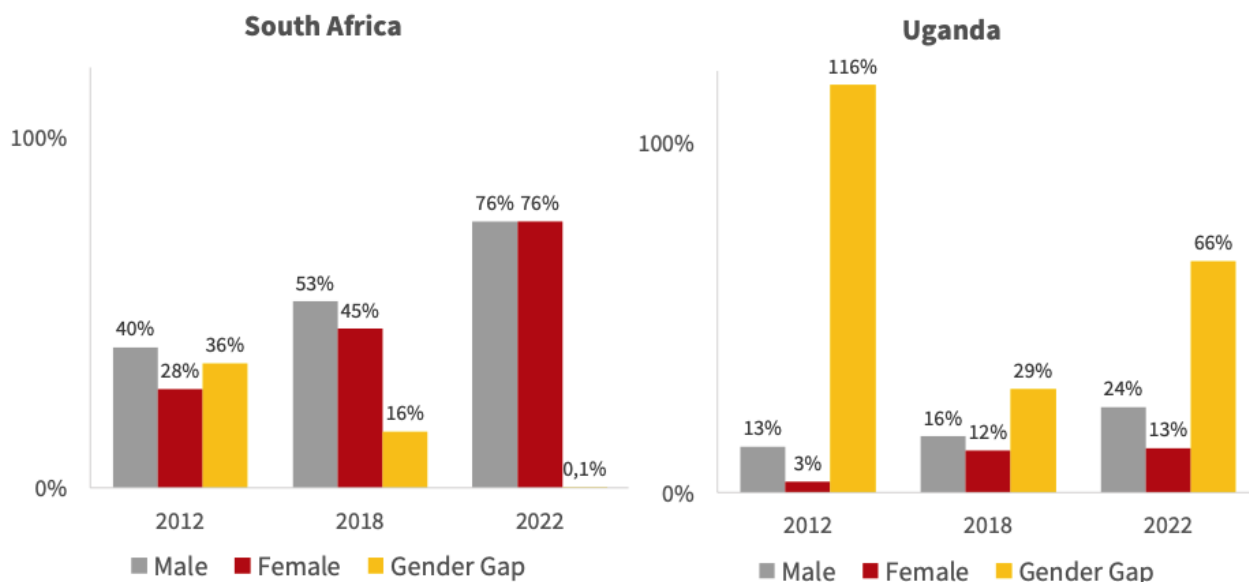
Dr Katherine Getao, the keynote speaker, spoke of Africa being excluded from participation due to language barriers and a lack of common understanding. Content on the Internet and digital technology operations in general tend to be in the dominant colonial languages, meaning that a significant number of people who only speak African languages are excluded. Dr Getao emphasised the extent to which women are targeted by numerous online threats, and that in order to make digital technologies safe for their use we need programmes to improve their digital literacy and their awareness of cyber safety and cyber hygiene. She also affirmed the need for women to move from being consumers of information and applications to being producers and eventually to becoming innovators. She said this would be the only way to create relevant, responsible and reliable technology and applications that recognise the power of women.

Intersectional inequality and digitalisation

Drawing on the After Access surveys done by RIA, LIRNEasia and Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP), and used for a background paper commissioned by UN Women for CSW67, **RIA's Andrew Partridge** presented data from the Global South and other regions demonstrating the intersectional nature of digital inequalities in relation to gender, class (education and income), age, and location (urban or rural). The presentation drew on International Telecommunication Union (ITU) data to show that while progress has been made in terms of achieving more equitable access in some countries, digital inequality has widened in others. In addition, once analysis moves beyond access alone and looks at equality in terms of how individuals are able to use digital tools, then even greater inequalities emerge.

In demonstrating the intersectional nature of gender inequalities with other inequalities in society, Andrew demonstrated the value of survey data to be able to identify more precisely points of policy intervention so that these interventions have the optimal collective benefit. He noted that while currently there is more data demonstrating evidence on intersectional inequalities, this data remains

patchy. He called for more effort to be put into the generation of better disaggregated data to address policy issues more holistically. He noted the challenge of finding out information about people who are not online because they are marginalised and restricted from accessing and using technologies. His presentation ended with a call for solutions for data gaps which are evident and which mean that marginalised groups get under-represented in digital initiatives, and are ultimately put at a disadvantage through digital transformation.



While gender inequality in terms of the total percentage of the population which uses the Internet has declined in South Africa since before the COVID-19 pandemic, it has risen significantly in Uganda. Source: Presentation by Andrew Partridge

Discussing Andrew’s presentation, the **ITU’s Anne Rita Ssemboga** reiterated the need for empirical analysis that would enable informed and evidence-based policy-making so as to advocate for gender equality. She noted that whereas other regions have improved in terms of gender equity, only 34% of women in Africa are using the internet according to [ITU Global Connectivity Report 2022](#) with little or no progress on gender parity in the last three years. She noted that ITU through its membership, academia and research partners such as RIA collects data on access, ownership and use but in most cases data is rarely available nor disaggregated by gender particularly for economies in Africa. She also noted the need to move beyond measuring ownership and access to understanding digital inequalities from a broader demand perspective by analysing enabler such as affordability (data prices), digital skills and competence, digital content and applications, safety on line among other, factors that are a prerequisites for meaningful digital inclusion. There is limited data for instance on the participation of women in the digital and platform economy; digital entrepreneurship and leadership role in Africa. Partnership at national, regional and global level are crucial in addressing the dual data and digital gender inequality challenges in developing economies.

Honourable Neema Lugangira (MP Tanzania) called for targeted efforts on digital capacity building such as digital literacy and skills for women in rural communities. She talked about how women in rural

areas lack the necessary digital skills to take part in the digital economy. She also called for the development of frameworks that will accelerate inclusion across countries. Honourable Neema also pointed out how regulatory regimes treat community networks as commercial entities, yet they have been established as initiatives that have served to drive Internet penetration in areas with no infrastructure and lower incomes. Delving deeper into the drivers behind the gender gap in Internet access, she reaffirmed the importance of dealing with online gender-based violence (OGBV). She said that often women using Internet platforms to market their products face extreme online violence that forces them off the platforms. Women politicians are also frequent victims and OGBV remains a hurdle for womens’ participation in politics and governance.

Challenges for gender justice in Africa’s digitalisation process

As the use of digital technologies and the digitalisation of both public and essential private services increasingly becomes the focus of African governments, women face new types of inequalities stemming from poor access due to a lack of affordability, skills and online safety. This foundational inequality widens and multiplies as various areas of the economy are digitised. Workshop participants were divided into groups where they discussed the challenges for gender justice in the digitalisation of economies in the African region and potential policy solutions in a breakout session.

Summary of identified challenges from the breakout groups

From the breakout groups, the participants identified the following challenges to gender injustice.

<p>Access -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several factors hinder women’s access to and use of digital technologies including affordability, digital literacy, and access to network infrastructure. This leads to a gender data gap and further inequalities. 	<p>Safety, online harassment -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exacerbation of injustices against women in the virtual world has a compounding impact on their offline realities. • Law enforcement is not capacitated to address gender-based violence from a feminist perspective.
<p>Neoliberalism, dominant epistemologies, multistakeholderism -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The inclusion of women in policy spaces is still done as a way of ticking boxes without their meaningful participation. The challenge of the real empowerment of women was raised. This includes flawed multistakeholderism in digital governance spaces. • The epistemic challenge of understanding the gender digital gap was raised. 	<p>Injustice, structural and systemic inequalities-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women still miss out in the design and production of technology. • With gender justice by design missing, bias and discrimination through the exclusion of marginalised voices, especially through automated decision-making, is exacerbated. • The advancement of technology does not take into account women’s perspectives in the design and implementation of these advancements.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a need to challenge the northern epistemologies which articulate digital inequality in narrow terms, excluding the contextual understandings of the Global South in policy decisions. 	
<p>Africa’s positionality, Africa’s narrative -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africa has not determined what gender justice in a digital age means for herself. • The positionality of Africa in the global financial market is still affected by the impact of colonialism. 	<p>Identities, avoid essentialisation of identities -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cultural aspect of how women are perceived has a huge effect on the successful implementation of regulation and on policy formulation. The social perception of a woman affects the inclusion of women in the digital ecosystem. • The application of gender justice in the digital realm requires an unlearning of normative gender ideologies that underpin the design of and innovation in technology.

Digital inequality, data and justice

While digital inequality has long been understood as reflecting the underlying historical and structural inequality of contemporary economy and society, the inability of most Africans to digitally substitute their access to work, schooling, banking, food and social grants to mitigate the health risks associated with COVID-19 and the economic fallout of lockdowns, has highlighted the compounding effects of digital inequality on structural inequality.

Dr. Alison Gillwald argued that as affordable and comprehensive access to digital services becomes critical to inclusive social and economic engagement, and indeed to survival as witnessed during the pandemic, redressing the digital inequality paradox has become one of the most wicked policy problems of our time. The paradox lies in the fact that as more people are connected, and as advanced technologies are layered over unevenly accessed and used, digital inequality is increasing. This is not only the case between those online and those offline (as is the case in a voice and basic text environment). It is also between those who have the technical and financial resources to use the Internet optimally, and those who are ‘barely’ online. The gap between those who passively consume a limited number of basic services and those able to put technology to full and productive use, and the few able to innovate and contribute to the prosperity of nations, is widening. As the After Access data showed, women amongst others at the intersections of multiple inequalities are those most marginalised from the range of digital services necessary.

The exclusion of these marginalised people from online services, remote and platform work and digital production makes them invisible in the data extracted by global monopoly digital platforms for the purposes of creating lucrative digital intelligence. As a result, those at the intersection of multiple

inequalities, and particularly black women, are absent, underrepresented and discriminated against in the algorithmic decision-making that is being covertly used to make and direct decisions that affect them.

She warned that data inequality or bias in algorithms is often narrowed down to issues of ethics by design or ‘human rights preserving’ designs and frameworks. She asked what a feminist lens on these underlying issues of intersectional inequality would look like and how valuable this perspective was.

Data for Sustainable Development’s Linet Kwamboka highlighted that there is a lot of exclusion in the digital economy. She mentioned that it is important women’s voices are heard and included in the process of building AI tools and solutions. Moreover, AI tools and solutions should be built to target special groups including people with disabilities.

Chenai Chair, from Mozilla Foundation, talked about how oftentimes the people who design technologies lack a feminist frame to be able to understand the issue around power. People then do not recognise that there are going to be power dynamics that are socially constructed in what they design. For example, hiring more underrepresented groups has been a popular solution for addressing the challenge of underrepresentation. However, the underlying power structures remain unaddressed. She added that it is important to ensure meaningful participation of women in all their diversities, including LGBTQ, in the design process which will then allow them to see innovation that is responsive to the realities they face.

Anita Gurumurthy’s IT for Change, cautioned against the dangers of unpacking digital economy issues with a colonialist lens. She echoed the importance of examining who is doing what and from what standpoint. She called on activists and scholars to add their views to the ongoing debates, mentioning how it is important to situate the discussions on coloniality, gender, and the digital economy in relation to memory, subjectivity, and rights or entitlements, and how the discourses and the material structures of production intertwine. She also mentioned that issues around automation, open data, digital skills, digital labour, inclusion, and empowerment are discussed in very specific ways and they retain certain imaginaries within the wider concept of digital capitalism.

Anita spoke of how the rhetoric of automation somehow seems to deterministically predict the future of work based on robotisation and algorithmification. Open data somehow invokes this warm and fuzzy language of ethics that argues for a particular form of openness that digital corporations benefit from, and not necessarily communities. She said the idea of skills and “skillification” is not defined in terms of social empowerment, and instead makes a certain imperialist claim through trade deals in the guise of capacity building.

Getting the feminist agenda into the digital compact

The following framings were raised in a group discussion session.

Data governance, data mobility and	Rights and data justice -
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<p>cross-border data flows -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cross-border data flows governed by intellectual property regimes that undercut the ‘commonising the digital’ need to be challenged– if the knowledge and infrastructure to process, collect, source, and store data is not shared with all then merely sharing the knowledge of who is extracting your data is not beneficial in and of itself. ● We need a new data governance regime that not only upholds the individual controls of all data subjects over their personal data, but also deals with the more complex challenge of leveraging data as a social knowledge commons for public value and benefit. This is important so that people’s claim to datafied intelligence is not mediated by market-based frameworks and existing normative structures of inequalities. ● It is not important only to know who your data is being used for for profit accumulation but how to shape them in relation to public interests. ● Privacy not just as a defence strategy against abuse but an affirmative project. Privacy frameworks should also include the right to control data flows, Southern infrastructures and data protection standards. ● The universal right to scientific knowledge and designing technologies are critical in steering the direction of progress and digital transformation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As much as it is important to stress first levels of human rights, the global digital compact should also address second levels of rights such as development and economic rights., These are critical for gender inclusion. ● While it is important to think about privacy and the regulation of data, we need to think about privacy embedded into the collective of the communities. ● The right to disconnect and the right to be forgotten while you are still left on the system, and how being left out leads to exclusions while also leading to regimes of erasure/visibility and ‘included exclusions’. ● Economic justice is deeply connected with realising social justice. Discussions on human rights should not be shielded from socio-economic embeddings (second and third generation rights). ● The new digital compact should look into issues of safety-by-design. Private companies have not incorporated safety because it makes no business sense.
<p>Consent, anonymity, privacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Our consensual participation in some sense becomes a false choice where we cannot access services without consenting to our 	

<p>data being collected. Anonymised and non-personal data can be re-identified and therefore retroactively made personally traceable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The process of production of data and its uses is a conversation that falls within the ambit of privacy that is not broadly understood. ● Economic justice – regulation, human rights –and the broadening of privacy to include public interest use and the deployment of data through complementary, community-based approaches was necessary. 	
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3. Next Steps

The report arising from this workshop would be posted on the RIA website for comment, following which it would be submitted to IT for Change for inclusion in the composite paper they would be producing with FES to submit to UN Women for CSW 67.

Anita noted that the discussions had not only provided critical feminist perspectives in the context of the CSW, but they had also extended these perspectives in the context of economic justice and global justice. The consolidation of the reports from the regional consultations provided an opportunity to see the similarities in thinking as well as the unique, region-specific differences. Drawing on this and other initiatives would be convening an online public consultation on key aspects of the Digital Compact, such as digital inequality and data injustice, governance of global digital goods (internet, data, cybersecurity) to ensure access and quality and investment and to prevent harms and mitigate risks.