

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

CHARTER OF FEMINIST DEMANDS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Anita Gurusurthy and Nandini Chami



This Charter outlines normative directions and an action agenda for a feminist approach to digital transformation, based on wide-ranging consultations with nearly 100 participants from the Global South.



It calls for key principles of digital governance – openness, freedom and security – to serve as a guide in attaining constructive pluralism, equitable and just societies, and flourishing futures across our planet.



It asserts that the UN Global Digital Compact must secure state and corporate accountability for protecting women's human rights in the digital age, a new global social contract for a socially just digital transition, and institutional arrangements to ensure network and data resources become part of the commons.

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INTRODUCTION

The gender digital divide is not just an access gap; it is a democratic deficit that thwarts meaningful participation of women and girls in all their diversity in the emerging digital paradigm. As welfare delivery and emergency cash transfer programmes went “digital by default” with the onset of the COVID pandemic, the world’s poorest women and girls [fell through critical social security nets](#). Technology-mediated violence also intensified in the post-pandemic period, [disproportionately affecting](#) women human rights defenders, women in politics, women in media, LBT women, women from ethnic minorities and indigenous communities, and women living with disabilities, undermining their socio-economic well-being and public participation.

Accelerated digitalisation of economic activity presents both opportunities and challenges. Platform-mediated interactions can bring [economic opportunities](#) for peripheral geographies and women if [public policies](#) and investments are able to keep pace. However, despite the transformative potential of digitalisation, the mainstream platform economy reflects and reproduces [gendered exclusions](#) in labour markets along intersecting axes of geography, class, race, and caste. Women who are marginal farmers, informal workers or small producers face exploitative working conditions and a livelihood squeeze in [digitalising global value chains](#). Although the AI revolution does bring exciting prospects to revolutionise production systems, the fastest growing and highest paid jobs in the emerging AI economy are characterised by a [wide gender gap](#). Low-wage work historically dominated by women is also most susceptible to technological displacement [in the digital revolution](#). With school closures and the switch to remote learning after the pandemic [expelling girls from education systems](#), our knowledge futures face unprecedented questions about women’s meaningful participation and full social citizenship.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative to place the gender equality agenda at the heart of the proposed [Global Digital Compact](#), as the Generation Equality Forum’s Action Coalition on Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality has also [urged](#). The [Beijing Declaration \(1995\)](#) provides a comprehensive normative starting point for such a Compact at the global level, underscoring the need for an explicit commitment to harnessing the ongoing digital transition in order

to advance “the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interests of all humanity” (para 3, Beijing Declaration).

In 2022, IT for Change and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung convened a series of consultations across the Global South to co-develop feminist visions of our shared digital future. We partnered with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in the Asia-Pacific region; in the Middle East and North Africa, with Access to Knowledge for Development Center, School of Business, The American University in Cairo; in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Research ICT Africa; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, with FES’ Regional Trade Union Programme. These consultations involved active participation on the part of almost 100 feminist academics, scholar/practitioners, activists, civil society representatives and trade unionists, who debated the normative directions and action agenda for a feminist approach to digital transformation. Insights from the dialogues have been crystallised into this charter of feminist demands from the Global South concerning the UN Global Digital Compact.

Grounded in foundational feminist principles of openness for constructive pluralism, freedom for equitable and just societies, and security for flourishing futures, the charter urges the Global Digital Compact to address three central demands:

- State and corporate accountability for protecting women’s human rights in the digital age
- A new global social contract for a socially just digital transition
- Commoning the internet and data resources

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CORE PRINCIPLES FOR A FEMINIST GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT

The UN Global Digital Compact seeks to outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all. These core principles of openness, freedom and security must be infused with a feminist perspective to ensure that the ongoing digital transformation of our economies and societies can usher in a gender-just world that is affirming of all individuals and their path to self-actualisation.



PRINCIPLE 1. OPENNESS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE PLURALISM

Rationale

Social markers of power are deep-seated in what are described as the open spaces of the internet. Instrumentalist openness that is agnostic to power will not produce truly diverse and inclusive societies. Openness in the digital context needs critical engagement with the pseudo-diversity tactics adopted by profit-driven platforms, the covert tyranny of elitism in open communities, and the alienating subjectivity of surveillance societies. Open knowledge cultures in digitality call for a politics of difference that does not flatten the reality of social stratification and gender-based exclusion.

Principle

The affordances of internet-mediated agoras for open communication and diverse communities must be channelled towards gender-transformative knowledge societies that are ready to embrace ever-evolving identities and assertions in digitality's fluid spaces. The principle of openness for constructive pluralism will lead to feminist emancipation, empowering self-expression, serendipitous solidarity and trans-local publics.

We need safe digital agoras that reject the racist and patriarchal algorithmic mediation of Big Tech platforms.

– Participant, regional consultation, Latin America and the Caribbean





PRINCIPLE 2. FREEDOM FOR EQUITABLE AND JUST SOCIETIES

Rationale

The architectures of platform life present us with a dazzling array of apps that feed an illusion of choice and voice, even as the promise of internet freedom is being hijacked for private profit. Meanwhile, states eager to quell civic freedoms have appropriated digital technologies as devices for social engineering and control over female bodies and labour. The digital revolution and its tendencies to decentralise power and control have been enfeebled. The quest for an equitable and just future will remain meaningless unless digitality can reverse the feminisation of economic precarity, social vulnerability and political marginalisation.

Principle

The principle of freedom in digitality implies the ability of each and every individual to benefit from the digital paradigm and from the expansion of strategic life choices for women and girls. Guaranteeing freedom in the digital society is not only about eliminating precarity and inequality, but also entails creating conditions that promote 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. Freedom in digitality must lead to maximisation of the internet's public value along with data-enabled intelligence for vibrant, flourishing and democratic societies and economies that privilege the role of women as socio-political and economic agents.

The infrastructure and capacity to process, collect, source, store data needs to be widely shared in order to ensure the knowledge generated from networked data becomes part of the commons.

– Participant, regional consultation, Africa



In the digital paradigm, we need to ensure the overall well-being of women. Our responses need to straddle the public-private continuum.

– Participant, regional consultation, MENA





PRINCIPLE 3. SECURITY FOR FLOURISHING FUTURES

Rationale

Co-option of the internet as well as of data, AI and other frontier technologies to entrench corporate power has besieged people and the planet through structural violence that perpetuates geographies of neo-colonial exploitation. Our societies are in a permanent state of attack as our lives, life-worlds, and the environment are cannibalised for data extractivism. Trust in global digital cooperation is reduced to a narrow, technical idea that is ineffective in tackling the dominant digital order’s predatory impulses.

Principle

A secure digital future is one that guarantees the right of all peoples to development as human flourishing. There can be no just digital transition without respect for planetary boundaries, a global public sphere free from gender-based violence, and an enduring peace without weaponisation of cyberspace and militarisation of AI. The digital paradigm must be rescued from the destructive impetuses apparent in its current trajectory and refashioned towards an egalitarian international order based on mutuality and co-implication.

It is not enough to talk about women’s digital rights. We need a feminist economics to tackle inter-class and inter-country structures of inequality in the emerging data and AI paradigm.

– Participant, regional consultation, Asia Pacific



It is time to move past the securitarian discourse of ICT governance and adopt a people-centric approach to digital governance that focuses on women’s full participation in the digital economy and society.

– Participant, regional consultation, Africa



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WHAT FEMINISTS SEEK FROM THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT: KEY DEMANDS

A Global Digital Compact rooted in the feminist principles discussed above needs to adopt a range of gender-transformative action agendas and intervention strategies elaborated below in three specific demands.



3.1. STATE AND CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PROTECTING WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Challenge

The lurking violence in online spaces is a continuing reminder of a brutal and unjust society that renders women vulnerable to exploitation. The challenge we face in this context is not only to address a new space of social interaction called the internet. It entails identifying and responding to the new relationalities wrought by the intermeshing of the offline and online in digital society.

The human rights frame, therefore, needs to avoid simplistic approaches that view digitality through the prism of [the offline-online binary](#) that reduces amelioration and justice to [individualised remedies](#). It must identify and acknowledge the emerging structures of gendered oppression in

the digital paradigm, offering bold and empowered imaginations of new relationalities. It needs to straddle protection of autonomy and agency (individual and collective) in techno-social restructuring of our bodies and lives, processes and institutions.

States have a duty to respect, protect and promote women's human rights, undertaking legal, institutional, policy and programming measures appropriate to the digital transition. The state-corporate surveillance complex that thrives on algorithmic behavioural engineering needs to be dismantled. Robust regulation to prevent violation of women's human rights in corporate-controlled global data value chains is of critical importance.

Checkmating the Digital Corporation

Big Tech companies monopolise creation of online content, with algorithms prioritising paid and popular content that often represents fascist and misogynistic viewpoints. Circulation of such content is a threat to democracy and women's free expression.

– Participant, regional consultation, MENA



The greatest paradox of our times is that the call for women's inclusion into the connectivity paradigm translates into their co-option into the matrix of data capital. The data economy dominated by Big Tech is exploitative, exclusionary and environmentally unsustainable, reproducing gender inequalities in all their inter-sectional dimensions.

– Participant, regional consultation, Africa



When national governments have regulated Big Tech, it has been done to further state control of economic development, rather than to ensure corporate accountability and protect citizens' rights. This must change.

– Participant, regional consultation, Asia Pacific



Big Tech giants and transnational corporations controlling digital value chains are able to coordinate successfully to maintain a global network of capital flows for maximising extractivism. This is a governance deficit. Without a supranational body, we cannot monitor and check the exploitative excesses of these companies in their cross-border operations or hold them accountable for women's human rights.

– Participant, Latin America



Our Demand

The UN Global Digital Compact must tackle the systemic and structural injustices in the digital society and economy stemming from the unbridled power and market excesses of the transnational platform business model.

In specific terms, the UN Global Digital Compact must:

- be grounded in values, actions and institutions resolutely committed to a gender-transformative digital paradigm that advances the rights, dignity and agency of all people in all their diversity
- be founded on a binding global governance framework for a gender-just digital society and economy with concrete commitments for actions by state parties and transnational corporations to advance women's human rights
- pave the way for agile local-to-global people-led processes to define the place and role of data, AI and other frontier technologies for structural transformation
- provide system-wide guidance on human rights due diligence and impact assessments for women's digital rights (with the involvement of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)
- introduce specific measures for inter-agency cooperation, financing and system-wide oversight in order to ensure gender transformative outcomes in the digital paradigm



3.2. A NEW GLOBAL SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR A SOCIALLY JUST DIGITAL TRANSITION

The Challenge

An instrumentalist view of digital technologies as a route to social control and market power has spawned an ecologically destructive and socially untenable world. We run the risk of losing ground on precious achievements for gender justice. As the UN Secretary-General observed in a [speech in July 2020](#), two seismic shifts could exacerbate inequalities in our times – climate change and digital transformation.

In order to replace the extractive logic of data capitalism with a new vision of a [socially just digital transition](#), we need a new global social contract that makes a dramatic departure from an economic perspective of development. The unsustainable costs of subordinating society and nature to the dominant digital paradigm are borne disproportionately by women in the Global South.

Firstly, national policies to grow the digital economy continue to be guided by a [neoliberal data model](#) that is detrimental to local ecologies and women's livelihood ecosystems, as it is based on exploitative supply chains.

Secondly, as essential digital infrastructures underpinning public services increasingly come under private-sector control, core governance functions become [privatised by default](#). This situation gives digital corporations enormous clout to shape social and economic policy decisions with impunity, even as marginalised citizens' interests are [undermined](#). Furthermore, in the light of digitalisation and centralisation of government services, women face heightened [risks of exclusion](#) from social security systems and are unable to exercise their right to be heard.

Lastly, multilateral regimes for development cooperation, taxation, trade and intellectual property (IP) present barriers that prevent developing countries and LDCs from acquiring the appropriate infrastructural capabilities for autonomous data-enabled development, including socially just and gender-transformative policies.

The existing global trade regime further [entrenches](#) wealthy nations' geopolitical and geoeconomic domination by advocating rules for data flows that impoverish countries of the South while tightening the hold of corporations from the North over intellectual property (IP) in digital innovation. Meanwhile, powerful corporations have deployed the [rhetoric](#) of women's digital upskilling as a carrot to induce Southern countries to sign up to hegemonic, anti-feminist economic cooperation agreements.

On the one hand, there are no substantive discussions in international fora on [Official Development Assistance](#) for digital infrastructural development and technological cooperation except in relation to trade and market access. On the other hand, global taxation regimes – even after the [much-hyped OECD Two-Pillar solution](#) – are unable to prevent digital corporations' tax evasion practices, which impede generation of fiscal resources critical for gender-just policies. This results in displacement of social care burdens onto women, reinforcing gender hierarchies.

An inadequate global multilateral system that remains impervious to these crises reinforces and perpetuates a digital infrastructural deficit that exacerbates loss of natural resources and gender exclusionary policies in the South. There is an urgent need for a new global social contract for sustainable and equitable development that is adequate to the digital paradigm.

Saying No to the Neoliberal Data Model

Data is now being collected from every part of the agricultural value chain – Big Agri and Big Tech companies are utilising this data to accelerate the expansion of corporate-controlled agriculture. Digital greenhouses operated by robot and drone systems are dispossessing and displacing agricultural workers and small farmers. What if the whole system crashes? Who can be held responsible and accountable? And how does this square with food sovereignty and justice?

– Participant, regional consultation, Asia Pacific

States need to adopt and enforce feminist economic policy measures such as the ILO's 5R Framework for decent care work. Without this, exploitation of women's labour and unpaid care work in the platform economy cannot be stopped.

– Discussions, regional consultation, MENA

Digital trade agreements use gender equality as a decoy to push for open digital markets and free cross-border data flows. Governance of cross-border data flows is reduced to the one-point issue of compliance with protection of personal data. But what is never discussed is that prevailing IP regimes (consolidated through these digital trade rules) enable dominant corporations to co-opt cross-border data flows to consolidate their economic dominance of digital value chains.

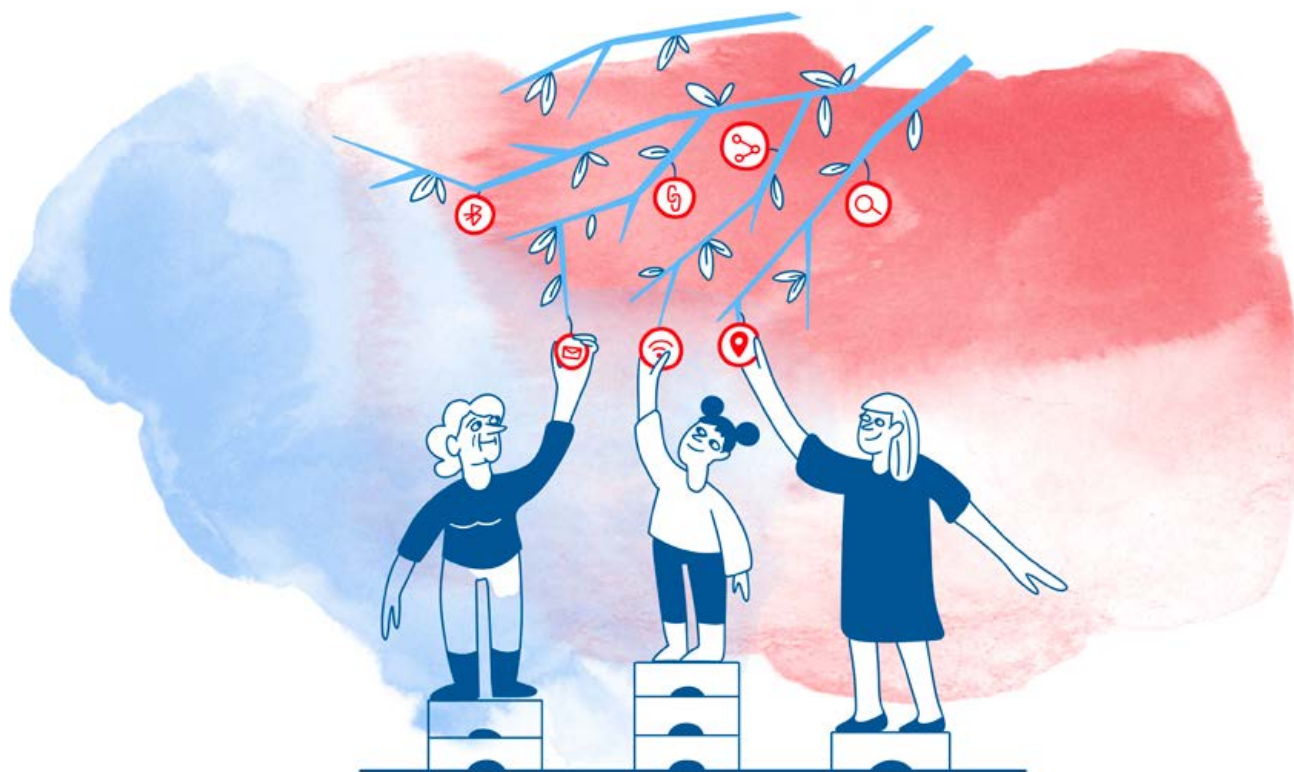
– Discussions, regional consultation, Africa

Our Demand

The UN Global Digital Compact must steer a shift away from the neoliberal policy choices at the heart of the extractivist model of datafied development. The socio-institutional architecture of digitality must aim for a systemic quantum shift – respecting the human rights, dignity and agency of all people as well as the [rights of nature](#) inherently associated with natural ecosystems and species. An integrated vision that brings together actions for social equity, environmental sustainability and digital justice is an urgent priority. The internet and the social resource of data and data-based intelligence must be harnessed as a future-ready force for gender-transformative, ecologically compatible development.

Specifically, the Global Digital Compact must:

- demonstrate clarity and alacrity to affirm the twinning of human rights and the rights of nature as the basis of a new digitality, acknowledging the gendered crisis brought on by the current rapacious, socially destructive and environmentally unsustainable digital order.
- lay the material foundations for revitalising development cooperation towards equitable and socially just digital innovation. Global digital cooperation needs a well-resourced and dedicated line of funding for a new global work programme to equip low and middle income countries (LMICs) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) with public digital infrastructure and policy development towards gender-inclusive, livelihoods-oriented, and ecologically respectful models. The Digital Development Tax mechanism proposed by the UN Secretary-General in his 2021 report, [Our Common Agenda](#), must be set up and used to finance this work programme.
- encourage South-South cooperation to strengthen locally appropriate digital models led by women and girls that give due place to diverse forms of knowledge and modes of socio-economic organising.
- ensure that adequate Official Development Assistance is mobilised to double public digital infrastructure in developing countries by 2030, while ensuring that 50% value from the digital economy accrues to the bottom 50% nationally and globally by 2030.
- validate and make way for alternative platform, data, and AI models rooted in social and solidarity economy models that are embedded in values of local accountability, women's participation and ecological sustainability. Achieving the SDGs in a way that affirms that people and the planet matter depends on urgent acknowledgment that a laissez-faire digital economy has failed women and girls.
- provide direction for transforming and harmonising multilateral policies on digital trade, taxation, IPR regimes, labour rights in digital value chains, and so on, to ensure effective reining in of corporate impunity, promotion of political and economic sovereignty for all nations and peoples, and carving out of digital economy pathways compatible with gender justice and ecological justice.



3.3. COMMONING THE INTERNET AND DATA RESOURCES

The Challenge

The internet as well as data, AI and other frontier technologies have been primed to entrench the power of [financial markets](#) rather than ensure democratisation of economic and social life. The walled-garden business model [that has taken over the internet](#) commodifies people, unabashedly appropriating their attention and identity for profit. Gender diversity [is a crucial input](#) for the data(-hungry) economy, as Big Tech corporations draw on their material-discursive power to evade responsibility for their data crimes. Digital and data rights are still not available to majority populations, especially women and girls from the Global South.

Attempts to use the affordances of digitality for community and solidarity have continued nevertheless, especially through open-source, open-knowledge, open-data, and other open-technology communities, but these enclaves remain vulnerable to [capitalist cannibalisation](#) and [state authoritarianism](#). Over and above their frequent lack of the requisite legitimacy and resources to provide locally viable alternatives, they are by and large [gender exclusionary](#) and [even sexist](#).

This demonstrates that we need to take immediate action to reclaim the internet as a [global knowledge and communication commons](#), disavowing surveillance capitalism and embracing the generative peer-networking affordances of the horizontal [web](#) of the hyperlink.

Rejecting internet platforms' behavioural surveillance model does not necessarily mean entirely negating the optimisation advantages of data-based intelligence. Instead of an economic order that leverages the global internet for centralised data value creation that benefits a handful of transnational platform companies, we should build a feminist economic order in which [distributed cooperative organisations](#) produce value from the social commons of data, with a view to building feminist economies and societies that accord primacy to "mutual (human) support, cooperativism, care work, and social and environmental ends".

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. Corporations guilty of hijacking digitalisation for private gain cannot be given pride of place at the policy table. That would be an absurd scenario; we cannot ask [Big Tech to govern itself](#). A multistakeholder approach that is oblivious to the social power in the room is not going to redeem gender inequality.

Infographic 4. Taking Back the Internet and Data Commons

Multi-stakeholder policymaking has been subject to corporate capture and that has resulted in digitalisation being framed as an apolitical and exclusively technical issue without consideration of its impact on societies and the planet.

– Participant, regional consultation, Asia Pacific



Within the data governance policy debates in the UN system, one idea that is increasingly gaining traction is that the data commons must be governed as a global public good, as this will aid open science and innovation that is beneficial to humanity at large. At first glance, this idea seems excellent and in sync with the feminist commitment to preserving the open knowledge commons from enclosure. However, there is a catch. As long as infrastructural capabilities to mine intelligence from data are limited and confined to the hands of a few corporations and states, treating data as a global public good and allowing it to flow across borders without any restrictions will only aid capture of its value by the powerful.

– Discussions, regional consultation, Latin America and the Caribbean



Our Demand

The UN Global Digital Compact should seize the opportunity to forge a digital future in which the moorings of democracy shift from narrow, state-centric territorial sovereignty to a broader people's sovereignty, supported through the rule of law. It must be alert to the possibilities for post-national/trans-local solidarities and commonsification of productive resources that feminist movements have long advocated.

In specific terms, the Global Digital Compact must:

- provide a new radical basis for governance of the global knowledge commons of the internet, to ensure that its material affordances can enshrine democracy, equity, and the right to participation and community for all peoples, especially women who are at the margins of the digital society.
- call for a new approach to governance of data resources, recognising a) aggregate data as knowledge commons, b) the a priori claims that 'source communities' – communities from whose interactions and territories data is aggregated – have over such commons, and c) the equal right of women in stewarding the use of community data and obtaining an equitable share in its benefits. Such an international politico-economic data order based on sovereign equality of all nations and peoples must be designed for the realisation of human rights in the digital age, including the right to development.
- must reject the corporate-captured multi-stakeholder model of digital policymaking and instead call for the establishment of a new, independent UN Body on Digital Transformation. This new UN body should kickstart the process of democratic deliberations towards building a global digital constitution that will enable effective governance of the internet and data commons. It should also guarantee remedies for capture of digital resources by powerful corporations and states.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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FES' Regional Trade Union Project in Latin America and the Caribbean

THE FUTURE IS FEMINIST

"The Future is Feminist" is a global project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, working worldwide with feminists to develop positive visions for a better future that focus on economic policy issues and critical economic perspectives. The project in particular analyses the effects of digitalization and the future of work. It identifies common concerns of feminist and labour movements to create space for new powerful alliances aiming at social change. The project is a continuation of the work of feminist networks in the Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Northern Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa regions. It offers activists the opportunity to exchange ideas on burning issues, regional experiences and political strategies while serving as a space to experiment with new ideas.

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For further information on this topic:
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