

Preface

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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.

