

The Tangled Web of Women in Work: A Feminist Account

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Abstract

This book offers a feminist account for women's work experiences and negotiations in the Global South. Drawing on experiences and ideas from diverse locations—industry, civil society, academia, and activism, among others—the chapters in the book share a common purpose: to unpack the notions of work, fairness, and inclusion as they relate to gendered futures of work. This chapter provides an overview of the book and makes the case for FemWork.

Keywords: work, worker, women, networks, collectivization, Global South

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One of the great paradoxes of our times is that even as women become more educated and economies grow, their participation in the workforce drops. This drop has been most keenly experienced in emerging economies. In India, for instance, the women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) dropped by almost 23 percentage points between 2004–5 to 2020–21.¹ While part of this fall may be attributed to the global economic downturn in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reasons are more complex, revealing as much about social and cultural norms as it does about the material realities at the supply end of the value chain. The past decade has seen a burgeoning of interest in the broad questions around women and work; apart from the continuing struggle to recognize the economic value of home-making and domestic care work, there is a growing awareness of the many nuances that

1 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

shape the definitions and dynamics of women's work, whether it is done in the home or outside, in the fields or on the factory floor, and how it moves through the market at local and global scales.

In the South Asian context, the decrease in women's participation in the workforce has been found to vary according to the type of work and a range of sociocultural and demographic variables (Najeeb, Morales and Lopez-Acevedo 2020). However, there is also a strain of scholarship that contests the dominant narrative that women's participation is falling because of increasing household income and conservative social norms (while acknowledging these) and instead point to the need to create jobs that not only attract women to the labour force but retain them (Deshpande and Kabeer 2019; Deshpande and Singh 2021). Another issue is that of counting—or accounting for—women's work, which is often invisible or is subsumed into the household income in sectors such as farming or other traditional occupations including artisanal work, quite apart from the economic value of home-making (Kalpana 2016; Singh and Pattanaik 2020).

There are then two important directions in which we need to think, when it comes to the world of work in relation to women. The first is concerned with the nature of the labour market and the affordances of labour design (which we may also think of as platform design, though not limited to technological platforms) that encourage or discourage women workers. The second revolves around the nature of work and its valuation in the market and in society. The many questions arising within these two broad areas, and the possible answers they may yield, can allow us to build an intelligible patchwork that can inform both policy and practice, as well as offer input to the material infrastructures of *work-place* and *work-form*. For many years, the discourse of social justice has included the notion of fair work as the basis of fair trade, emphasizing the need for economic actors to facilitate transparency around working conditions and redressal mechanisms. While these issues have received attention mostly in relation to the gig economy and digital platform work,² the underlying principles remain equally important in traditional economic sectors as well.

Work-place considerations can range from the physical structure of the factory or shop floor to the laws and provisions that secure workers' rights in various sectors. In the digital era, this would include the design of platforms for gig work as also the education and sensitization of workers and employers around the evolving nature of rights and responsibilities in the new economy. It would involve the re-imagination of the role of the state and

2 <https://fair.work/en/fw/homepage>

other economic actors in ensuring safety and security, and the creation of structures that foster not only productivity but also wellness and community. It would also include the recognition of places where unorganized workers engage in labour—the home, the street, the homes of others.

Work-*form* considerations might include a reimagination of both work and worker. Work that is done in places that have not been traditionally considered locations of productive labour—such as the home—must then be counted within the economy. Whether done by hand (as in artisanal crafts) or by the heart (affective labour, physical and emotional care work), they are recognized and valued in economic, social, cultural, and psychological terms.

Feminism has always been preoccupied with work; the early demands of the women's movement had to do with better working conditions and fairer wages, and in some contexts, even the right to work outside the home. But one might argue that those early demands were still predicated on the structures of work as defined within patriarchal norms. Over the years, feminists have argued for a shift in the terms of engagement, a reconceptualization of the very understanding of “productive” labour, expanding classical Marxist notions of use and exchange value as they operate within a capitalist system. Labour that occurs within the home, mostly done by women, that creates the context and support for other forms of work done outside the home, has only recently been recognized as productive, and worthy of valuing in economic terms. However, feminist struggles have varied across the globe, their differential resistances responding to the specific ways in which patriarchal values have structured contexts, and thus thinking about women workers in the Global South and elsewhere, requires that we pay heed to these nuances.

Viewing both work-place and work-form through the lens of gender allows us to discern the details of lived experience that must then inform decisions about the future of work. Notwithstanding the drop in the numbers of visible women in the labour force, the reality is that most women work, albeit in the informal sector, where numbers are fuzzy and unreliable (Krishnan 2020). While informality can be a driver of employment opportunities, it also creates the conditions for exploitation and precarity, and this tends to be more pronounced in the case of women workers. In spaces of policy and design, both of which structure work-place and form (in liberating and constraining ways), there is little consideration of the woman at the very end of the value chain. What are the specific material and affective conditions of her work? How might design—of technology, spaces, environments—create more favourable conditions on the supply side of labour that encourage women not only to enter the workforce but remain within it? What feminist values

might inform the transactions at various stages of the value chain so that work can be fair, dignified, and perhaps even fulfilling? How would these feminist values then allow us to reimagine a more inclusive, empathetic, caring value chain that listens to those at every level, but perhaps more sensitively, to those who hold the most vulnerable positions in that chain?

These then are the preoccupations that undergird the messy, ambitious collaboration that has resulted in this book. Drawing on experiences and ideas from diverse locations—industry, civil society, academia, and activism, among others—the chapters in the book share a common purpose: to unpack the notions of work, fairness, and inclusion as they relate to gendered futures of work. We have sought to find common ground across typically siloed professions: academics approaching work through lenses of social justice, economics, or collectivization; gender and women's studies scholars attempting to document the multi-layered lives of labour; activists helping mobilize women and nurture emergent identities; policy advocates drawing on data to push change; dreamers who envision a world built on principles of equity; technology designers who believe that the digital can truly make the world flatter; and social entrepreneurs who seek to innovate in both form and function.

The contributors to the volume straddle several fields of expertise, and employ different vocabularies, often speaking in cadences that do not match, defying what may be seen as the oppressive grid of academic form, and breaking the disciplining boundaries of scholarly fields to find common ground. There are empirically grounded analyses and experience-based insights, keen observational reflections and musings that draw from years of engaging with policy and governance in different fields. It is a collection that is motley by design, offering a patchwork of ideas from present practice that together provide the ground for rethinking the future of work.

To imagine feminist—or in other words, inclusive—futures of work requires us to see, think, and feel from the perspective of those who have been historically marginalized, across geographies. We therefore deliberately move away from dichotomies of the West and the Rest, or Global North and South, to argue that the gendered conditions that produce precarity, informality, or other oppressions related to work are both specific and universal. If technologies designed in the West are insensitive to the needs of those elsewhere, they are equally insensitive to non-dominant groups everywhere. If automation leads to deskilling and precarity in the Global South, they do so in the North as well. Drawing the contours of a concept from locations considered peripheral can make it more inclusive and more broadly applicable than designing from the narrow view of the centre.

Feminist thinking also requires us to be comfortable with uncertainty and to recognize the flexible and permeable nature of boundaries, a way of approaching life that is both contingent and responsive to context, while attending to the resonances and commonalities that can help build networks of solidarity. Such solidarities serve not only as mechanisms of resistance, but also of negotiation, learning, support, and care. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many of the fault lines in the global economy that showed the deep connections between international supply chains and local markets. It offered us an opportunity to rethink how work could and should be thought about and valued within a broader framework of human rights, about the need to spread responsibility for social security in a sustainable manner.

The book grew out of an inquiry, supported by IDRC,³ into five sectors in India and Bangladesh that employed large numbers of women workers, prompted initially by a curiosity about the nature of work and women's communicative ecologies. These sectors were construction, sanitation, home-based artisanal work, platform-based salon work, and app-based ride-hailing. While each of these sectors is distinct in terms of hiring patterns, seasonal shifts in work availability, and the nature of the work itself, they all share to some extent the characteristics of precarity and ambiguity of contracts and employer obligations, and above all, an insensitivity to women's worlds. The gig economy is normally thought of in terms of technology and platformization, but women have always worked in gig mode, hiring themselves out by the hour (sanitation and construction) and by the task (in artisanal work, salon, and ride-hailing). As we engaged with the workers themselves and with a range of other stakeholders across these sectors and in spaces of technology design, policy, and advocacy, we realized that work lives were deeply entangled with a range of other issues, ranging from local politics to state and national labour policies, to the socio-cultural dynamics of caste, religion, and community.

As the digital permeates into all sectors of the economy, from ordering and transacting work, managing compensation for labour to communicating with client, contractor, and co-worker, it also becomes a necessary dimension to the future of work. Some might argue that the future of work is nothing if not technologically mediated, and while its importance is undeniable, it is equally important to recognize those in the shadows of the digital. These

3 See <https://femlab.co> for more information. The project, formally titled "Organizing Digitally: Opportunities for Collectivization among Informal Women Workers in South Asia" drew on in-depth interviews with women workers and other stakeholders across these sectors over two years, from January 2020 to March 2022. All sectors were studied in India, while in Bangladesh, the garment industry was the focus of our attention.

may be artisans, city sweepers, or domestic workers whose everyday lives are marked by the absence of direct access to either devices or the internet, but whose work is no less shaped by the forces of digitization. In this volume, the presence of the digital is noted as channel and network, as materially proximal and aspirationally (even somewhat mythically) distant, as an opportunity to expand imaginations of work and as a surveillant system that can be negotiated with.

The book focuses on the core concerns of what we have dubbed the FemLab project but draws a much wider web that reflects the intersecting stakeholder groups that are engaged with these issues. The chapters in this book are grouped under four themes that reflect this approach to the futures of work.

Design

Building on the assumption that infrastructures—digital and physical—can both constrain and afford fair conditions for work, the six chapters in this section explore what inclusive design could mean for women at the bottom of the value chain. Digital media scholar Pallavi Bansal draws on interviews with drivers and company representatives from a ride-hailing service to posit a feminist approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI) design on these platforms that would apply Shaowen Bardzell's (2010) framework. Technology professional Shrinath V. muses in his piece on the challenges posed by digital interfaces to first-time users, arguing that developers need to be more cognizant of such experiences as they build products. User-experience expert Laura Herman from Adobe explores the many meanings that craft economies have for makers and buyers, and the ways in which the digital circulation of artisanal products forces an assignment of ownership. But platforms, when designed appropriately, can also serve to bridge the gender divide and promote more equitable growth, as described by Aishwarya Raman and Chhavi Banswal of the Ola Mobility Institute (OMI). This is further emphasized by Achyutha Sharma at Meesho who observes a shift from digital access to digital confidence among women entrepreneurs who join an online marketing platform, negotiating the strict societal norms that discourage their direct participation in the market. On a different note, feminist scholar Sai Amulya Komarraju documents how women gig workers—beauticians who offer their services through an online platform—experience both liberation and oppression as they navigate the app interface and develop creative workarounds.

These essays urge us to think more expansively about what we design, who we design for, and how the various objects and environments we seek to build collide with multiple aspects of people's lives.

Governance

How work is facilitated by states, organizations, and institutional processes also defines and positions the worker, for better or worse. Systems of identity creation and logics of compensation may be one aspect of this, but so are the mechanisms and methods of information flow between the many points in a value chain. The six chapters in this section cover sectors ranging from construction to garments to artisanal crafts, and consider multiple scales of policymaking, programme planning, and implementation. Media scholar Upasana Bhattacharjee's essay opens the section, interrogating the dominant discourse around the artist-entrepreneur which, she notes, shifts attention to craft as a matter of heritage revival rather than livelihood. Radhika Radhakrishnan, Ana María Rodríguez Pulgarín, and Teddy Woodhouse draw on an examination of digital inequality to propose a policy framework for meaningful connectivity that could close the digital gender gap. Taking on a government-led project of resettlement for daily wage workers in a southern Indian city, communication professional Sunitha Don Bosco and housing and development expert Maartje van Eerd force us to recognize the systematic exclusion of the urban poor from techno-utopian policies and plans. Sociologist René König and Management student Paula Wittenburg take on the challenging dimension of ethical governance within the corporate sector. As consultants Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi and Aditi Surie write, it is hard to ignore the impact of technology on a highly gendered sector, education, and their chapter looks at how EdTech has opened up new opportunities for teachers while also turning them into gig workers, with all the precarities that this implies. In the last essay in this section, migration scholar Shweta Mahendra Chandrashekhar zooms out on the knotty problem of migrant worker rights in the construction sector.

Networks

Manuel Castells argued, many years ago, that the primary mode of social organization in the twenty-first century would be networks (Castells 1996). This would, he noted, create the conditions for power to disperse through the

network but also concentrate at the nodes. Our experience in the FemLab project reveals that the characteristics of networks vary according to the size and nature of their formation. To discern how networks form and who populates, controls, or grows them, is a creative exercise that requires that one listens deeply to those who speak and those who remain silent. The first chapter in this section, by feminist technology studies scholar Chinar Mehta, asks how we might think about stakeholder analysis in these amorphous spaces of women's work, where the invisible is often what shapes participation in the network. This is followed by a provocative account by critical legal scholar Siddharth Peter de Souza and visual communication designer Siddhi Gupta, of the role of storytelling as a strategy to document concepts and ideas, visibilize marginal voices, and create solidarity around causes and issues. Media management student Brinda Gupta explores how women in the gig economy were hit by the breakdown of social security during the COVID-19 pandemic, asking whether new forms of consumerism could fill such gaps in the future. Bringing in a global perspective and years of experience with the World Bank, emerging technology markets scholar Jamil Wyne positions the future of work within climate change realities, while communication for social change scholar Anila Backer evocatively describes how a women's collective in Kerala effectively mobilized resistance to oppressive working conditions using a combination of online and offline methods. The last essay in this section, by Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Julia Camargo, Payal Arora, Amanda Alencar, John Warnes, and Erika Pérez, documents digital leisure practices and aspirational labour among displaced communities in Latin America.

Vision

The five essays in the final section of the book firmly position themselves within a feminist framework, pushing the boundaries of what equitable, just, dignified, and pleasurable worklife might look like for those in marginalized locations. The section opens with a chapter by strategy and change consultant Kate Boydell and livelihoods activist Sharmi Surianarain of Harambee Youth Accelerator, in which they emphasize the need to invest in care work while moving away from the narrative of scarcity and fear that has characterized the future of work discourse. Following this, feminist media studies scholar Usha Raman problematizes the blurred boundaries of work and life for those whose livelihoods are carried out from within domestic spaces. In her chapter, digital media anthropologist Payal Arora exhorts us to move away from linking work to honour, instead imbuing all

labour with dignity. In the chapter that follows, investor and change maker Ramona Liberoff asserts that the future of finance is feminist, outlining how this would revolutionize the innovation space and market dynamics. The final essay in the section, by entrepreneur and inclusion advocate Soumita Basu, lays out an approach to thinking about inclusive environments for work and life, that will go beyond mere accommodation.

An Approach to Thinking about Work and Workers

In the span of twenty-three chapters, this book offers multiple windows into the future of work—that is informed by feminist values, whether it be along the axis of design, governance, network/community, or the overarching vision. The contributors, coming as they do, from diverse locations and perspectives. The volume makes no apology for the seemingly disparate accounts of work—in fact, it is this diversity, we believe, that should inform and undergird the future of work for women and indeed, for all those at the bottom of the value chain. Current approaches in intersectional feminism, science and technology studies, and digital cultures all recognize the value of drawing on lived experiences and the politics of marginalization to build new knowledges as we move into increasingly interconnected modes of working and, indeed, living. We offer this as a dialogue across spaces of thinking, planning, and doing, a dialogue that can perhaps lead to a more grounded, inclusive approach to women's labour in a world and an economy that is increasingly governed by—even mediated by—the digital. In this approach, women's worlds are central to our understanding of what constitutes work and working, necessitating a social and cultural rather than an economic conceptualization, without of course denying the latter. This is what we would like to call FemWork, an idea elaborated on in the concluding essay in this volume.

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