



LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

FEMINIST VISIONS OF THE FUTURE OF WORK

AFRICA

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African women continue to face significant obstacles in gaining access to decent work, dignity, and the living standards they deserve, with the impacts on younger women being far more acute.



Technological advances may not reach a vast majority of African women as the digital divide remains gendered.



A feminist framework and discourse should provide alternatives based on principles of social justice and ecological sustainability.



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The
FUTURE
is
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1

INTRODUCTION

Since the World Economic Forum (WEF) first published its initial report *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2016), a significant volume of publications on ‘the future of work’ has surfaced.

The dominant discourse surrounding the future of work has largely been capital and Eurocentric, i.e. from the perspective of capital and productivity, and in some instances with fleeting references to the scale of labour displacement. Little of the aforementioned considerations on the future of work has been grounded in political and socioeconomic analysis. Limited attention has been on the African continent. Publications that reflect on the ‘future of work’ in Africa too often contain pervasive gender blindness, lack creative solutions that would be sensitive to the realities on the ground, and lack appreciation of constraints to the implementation of progressive social policies. The work, knowledge, skills, and experiences of feminist activists and scholars and women’s networks are largely absent from debates and discussions about the future of work.

Arguably, the most comprehensive study on the future of work in Africa is available in the WEF’s report, *The Future of Jobs and Skills in Africa: Preparing the Region for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2017), yet this report represents a true Gramscian case of ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’. It would likely leave the vast majority of Africans bewildered about the future prospects of their continent. While of course not all of Africa is shrouded in pessimism, the overwhelming optimism the WEF presents, hides the reality on the ground thereby setting the conditions for a steadfast will for change. For example, the report calls for investment in “soft infrastructure of childcare, eldercare and education” to enable a more gender-balanced labour market (WEF 2017: 10). With much of this ‘infrastructure’ in Africa already being provided in the form of unpaid labour, and the rest through overloaded public services dependent on a small tax bases, the WEF fails to back up its proposal with solutions for potential revenue sources.

Among the myriad of publications on the future of work, there are two which are important to consider and are broadly progressive: the International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) report, *The Future of Work* (2017) and the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Global Commis-

sion on the Future of Work report, *Work for a Brighter Future* (2019). However, a closer look at both of these finds little gendered or regional analysis. In light of the many global commitments around gender equality, such gender blindness is striking.

According to research undertaken by the African Development Bank Group (ADBG), industrial GDP remains very low across Africa, and the production of manufactured exports is still resource-based and of low-technology. On average, the current African industrial sector is comprised mainly of manufacturing and of fuel, mining and agricultural production. The sector generates 700 US dollars of GDP per capita, which is less than a third of the same measure in Latin America (2,500 US dollars) and barely a fifth of that in East Asia (3,400 US dollars) (ADBG 2018). In addition, African exports consist primarily of low-technology manufactured goods and unprocessed natural resources. For example, such products represent more than 80 percent of all exports from Algeria, Angola or Nigeria (*ibid*). Development of alternative models that understand the links between poverty, women’s work, and capitalist exploitation in these industries is needed. Such alternative models will require building peoples’ power and solidarity, rethinking and extricating communities from the commodifying logic of capitalism, and undoing patriarchal and extractivist systems (Randriamaro 2018).

In Africa, women provide critical support to their households and communities. In addition to childcare and other household responsibilities, they are responsible for an estimated 70 percent of crop production, 50 percent of animal husbandry, 60 percent of marketing, and nearly 100 percent of food-processing (Yong 2017). Despite these socio-economic contributions, women represent only 38 percent of the manufacturing workforce in Africa (*ibid*). At the same time, in some African countries women constitute an estimated 70 percent and upwards of the informal economy and precarious employment. (*ibid*).

Despite the progress in women’s rights and gender equality in the last decade, significant barriers remain to the full realisation of African women’s economic, social and political rights. African women are still largely engaged in informal and precarious work, and are the majority of workers at the bottom end of global supply chains (ITUC 2016; Oxfam In-

ternational 2014). Globally, women's prospects in the world of work and in the future of work are far from equal to men's. African women are no exception. This reality will have a significant impact on African women's voice and agency, economic independence, social mobility, lives and bodies, and ultimately their societal development.

Women are much less likely than men to participate in the labour market. Men's global labour force participation rate is 48.5 percent, women's labour force participation is 26.5 percent points below that of men, although in Sub-Saharan Africa, their participation rate is 64.7 percent (compared with 74 percent for men), which is considerably higher than other regions, developing and industrialised (ILO 2018a). However, this does not necessarily mean that Sub-Saharan women have an increased quality of employment.

Women are over-represented in informal employment in developing countries. This category of employment accounts for approximately one-third of the overall employment in developing countries, reaching 76.4 percent of total employment in developing countries and 46.2 percent in emerging countries (ILO 2018b). In close to one-third of Sub-Saharan countries (for which country data is available), more than 90 percent of women in non-agricultural employment are informally employed (*ibid*).

In most African countries, women in rural areas who work for wages are more likely than men to hold seasonal, part-time and low-wage jobs. Women therefore receive lower wages for the same work than men do. Men's average wages are higher than women's in both rural and urban areas. Rural women typically work longer hours than men when one considers their additional reproductive, domestic, and care responsibilities. Women earn 77 percent of what men earn, though this understates the full extent of gender pay gaps, particularly in developing countries where informal self-employment is prevalent (Food and Agriculture Organization 2011). Globally, women also face the motherhood wage penalty (the cost working women pay for childbearing and childrearing), which increases along with the number of children. In Benin and Tanzania, women work 17.4 and 14 hours, respectively, more than men per week. UN Women estimates that at the current rate of change, it will take 217 years before gender parity in income is achieved worldwide (UN Women 2018).

Women bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work, spending around 2.5 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men, with this figure rising to 3.4 times in Africa (OECD 2014). Unpaid care work is essential to the functioning of the economy, but is ubiquitously uncounted and unrecognised. The unequal distribution of unpaid care and household work between women and men, and between families and the society, is an important determinant of gender inequalities at work and of women's poverty (Edwards 2017). On average, women in developing countries shoulder the greatest burden of unpaid work. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women spend three times longer on household chores and caregiving, often in

addition to paid work. Following six in-depth country studies across three regions, the UN's research institute (UNRISD) estimates that if women's unpaid work were assigned a monetary value, it would constitute between 10 and 39 percent of GDP in these countries (OECD 2014).

Globally, nearly 40 percent of women with wage employment do not contribute to social protection. Women in developing countries are typically concentrated in informal employment, which provides no access to social protection (UN Women 2018). In Sub-Saharan Africa, coverage by statutory social security schemes is generally limited to those workers who are able to access long-term employment in the formal economy, a sector in which women are disproportionately under-represented (Ulrichs 2016). A total of 74.2 percent of women in wage employment in Sub-Saharan Africa do not contribute to social protection, which is due at least in part to their high levels of employment informality (*ibid*).

Despite these realities for African women, there is evidence that things are slowly changing for some women in Africa. More women are joining the formal sector of the economy, especially the public sector. More girls are pursuing higher education and enrolling in technical courses. More women can be found in management, more are moving into professions thus far dominated by men, and more are becoming gainfully self-employed. In the years to come, we are likely to see many changes, although Africa's poor economic situation will unlikely provide many decent job opportunities. There will be more competition for jobs and women may lose out, especially where they face structural challenges and domestic demands. Discrimination based on not only gender but also class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and identity, disability, HIV status, indigeneity, and migration status still pervade experiences in the world of work and access to opportunities.

As the ILO's *World Employment and Social Outlook, Trends for Women report* points out, "[w]here challenges and obstacles to women's equal participation persist, societies will be less able to develop pathways for economic growth combined with social development. Closing gender gaps in the world of work thus remains one of the most pressing labour market and social challenges facing the global community today" (2018a: 5).

This impulse paper attempts to remedy the absence of contextual and gendered analysis in discussions on the future of work. It poses a few critical gendered questions and offers considerations in how these questions can be addressed. We hope to set a political framework for bringing a feminist vision, and feminist voices, to discussions on the future of work in Africa.

2

DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM: THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

The 24th African Union Summit took place in January 2015 with a hopeful theme and a focus on the next 50 years of socioeconomic development in Africa. The year of 2015 would be the “Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development towards Africa’s Agenda 2063”. Aspirations included “inclusive growth and sustainable development”, where “development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth” (Shukla 2016).

In the last decade, countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have seen GDP growth rates close to 6 percent. Although growth rates have slowed since 2015, largely due to macro-economic trends in the global economy, it is estimated that rates in many Sub-Saharan Africa countries will still exceed 5 percent. The average GDP growth in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2016 and 2020 is predicted to exceed the global average (4.1 vs. 3.6 percent) (World Bank 2019). Foreign direct investment (FDI) continues to rise even as it moves away from commodity-based industries and focuses on technology, telecommunications, financial and business services (UNCTAD 2017). These African growth and investment developments have taken place for various reasons, including improved economic conditions; liberalisation and better business climates; political stability; greater regional and interregional cooperation; and increasing demand due to a growing labour force and an expanding middle class. Yet the continued focus on capitalist development has meant that these changes have not translated into meaningful and long-term impacts on the lives of the vast majority of Africans, nor on their conditions of poverty and precarity.

THE IMPACT OF NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

It is difficult to accurately predict the impact of information technology (IT) on African women, and role of African women in IT, due to a paucity of relevant data. Having said this, available statistics on the digital divide indicates that it is clearly gendered, and in some instances, is worsening. In 2013, the gender gap, the proportion of women using the Internet in relation to men, was at 20.7 percent, but this increased to 25.3 percent in 2017. In general, digital penetration rates in Africa remain very low, with 24.9 percent of

men and just 18.6 percent of women in Africa using the Internet. In comparison, Internet use in Europe has rates of 82.9 percent for men, and 76.3 percent for women (Gilbert 2018). The main obstacles to gender equity in digital inclusion in Africa include lack of access and affordability; lack of education, skills and technological literacy; gender-based structural and cultural inequalities; and the under-development of the overall digital ecosystem and the barriers that exist in establishing the necessary digital infrastructure.

The absence of a clear, overall benefit from the use of new technology, leads many to question whether the digital revolution will have any significant impact on African women. While many in development have little doubt about the benefits new technology can bring to the continent, any significant progress will be hampered by economic, social and political structures and value systems which continue to perpetuate Africa’s overall under-development. These structures and systems keep workers, and women in particular, in low-paid and low-status work, whatever the level of technology being used or introduced. Among many working on Africa’s development, there is a general feeling that technology alone will not be able to change the structures and systems perpetuating under-development and many doubt advanced technology is even needed.

Sub-Saharan Africa has low levels of formal skills and education relative to the global average, and this constrains industrial growth and increased digitisation (WEF 2017). However, it is important to recognize the constraints posed by capital’s resistance to state-led initiatives to develop alternative industrial paths, compel industry players to contribute to local skills development, and increase opportunities for decent work. This resistance has received considerable support from multilateral organisations.

In its *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends*, the World Bank states:

“*Strict labor regulations*, common in developing countries, and *overreliance on labor taxation* encourage faster automation by making hiring more expensive. It would be better to strengthen workers’ protection independently from work contracts by *delinking social insurance* from employment, offering independent social assistance” (emphasis added) (2016: 36).

However, the ILO has shown that labour regulations are not strict in developing countries, either in general or on the African continent in particular. Nonetheless, international finance institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have a long history of calling for the relaxation of labour regulations. Digitisation merely provides new opportunities to advance the same objectives. Loosening existing labour regulations could have severe implications for African women who are disproportionately involved in the informal economy, precarious work, and unpaid labour more generally. Delinking social insurance from employment on a continent where there is already minimal social assistance would further entrench women in unpaid care work.

Current debates about the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the future of work indicate that we are likely to witness unique gendered impacts that did not exist in the previous three revolutions. Additionally, the implications of technological changes will differ around the globe with respect to levels of development and speed of adjustment. New technology always reduces the demand for some types of labour and increases the demand for others. Over time, it has been demonstrated that new technology and globalisation primarily benefit the owners of capital more than workers and the poor. The 4IR will therefore not only affect the industrial working class, but will have profound impacts on women working anywhere on the continuum from informal employment to management. It will not discriminate on job category or job segregation.

Njuguna Ndung'u's (2018) optimism that "digitization will provide an important avenue for African economies to leapfrog not only financial development but also development across other sectors of the economy" indicates that there is potential for progress, but it can make no guarantees. The absence of guarantees is particularly acute when faced with the realities of unemployment, such as can be seen in Kenya where women comprise the majority of those who are unemployed. Of Kenya's 17.9 million employed people, less than half (8.7 million) are women, and the majority of those underemployed (60.5 percent) are also women (Africa Check 2019).

A feminist economic analysis can contribute greatly to addressing flaws within the current discourse, and to showing possible areas of interventions for various targets (trade unions, government, women's groups, academia, etc.) in order to make the 'future of work' a 'future for workers'. Such an analysis must challenge models of accumulation, extraction, profit, consumption, and growth, and must be built on justice, equality, and democracy, in which the needs of society and the creation of well-being are centered. This requires radical reshaping of our thinking and approaches.

3

MAIN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) points to a growing fragmentation and precarity in the labour market as a direct result of changes in the organisation of work. Many of the jobs predicted to disappear by 2050 are the lower skilled jobs predominated by women, in sectors such as transport, hospitality, and within the food industry (ITUC 2017).

Much has been written about the 4IR, including conflicting predictions about the future, arguments about whether it is a revolution or an evolution, and contrasting views about its impact on the global South versus North. These debates have the potential to deter attention from the relatively unchanged reality for women in work, particularly women in Africa.

As Valerie Cliff states (from a Northern perspective), “[t]his much is clear: as robots and artificial intelligence transform global production, skilled workers with college degrees will emerge the winners. Inevitably, the benefits will be distributed unevenly, and it is primarily women – from high-school dropouts to college graduates – who find the odds heavily stacked against them” (2018: 1).

Similarly, research conducted by Debra Howcroft and Jill Rubery from the Work and Equalities Institute at the University of Manchester (2018b) demonstrates that when economies take a downturn, technological determinism emerges. This determinism leads to debates on the future of work which are dominated by influential texts speculating on effects, predicting the future of work with uncertainty and wildly different estimates which feed speculation. Determinism has the effect of providing “great certainty” and therefore “immense appeal”, such that “[t] here has never been a time of greater promise, or greater peril” (Howcroft and Rubery, citing Schwab 2018).

Job displacement due to automation and digitisation will likely be delayed by up to a decade for many African countries owing to the ready availability of cheap labour vis à vis the cost of operating robots. However, transnational companies may re-shore jobs and production back to industrialised regions as automation becomes cheaper (Banga & Velde 2018). This increases the pressure on African countries to maintain the availability of cheap and exploitable labour force, and acts as a disincentive against efforts to

improve the development and enforcement of labour market regulation. It is likely that working women will fare badly, given their low levels of participation in the formal labour market.

Women’s economic empowerment is central to realising women’s rights and gender equality. Women’s economic empowerment includes women’s ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources; their access to decent work; control over their own time, lives and bodies; and their increased voice, agency, and meaningful participation in economic decision-making from the household to international institutions.

When more women work, economies grow. Women’s economic empowerment boosts productivity, increases economic diversification and income equality, and produces other positive development outcomes. Such positive outcomes arise even though economic growth does not automatically lead to reductions in gender-based inequality.

Increasing women’s and girls’ educational attainment contributes to women’s economic empowerment and inclusive economic growth. For the majority of women, significant gains in education have not translated into better labour market outcomes. Education, up-skilling, and re-skilling are critical for women’s and girl’s health and well-being, income-generating opportunities, and participation in the formal labour market.

There are several key challenges peculiar to African women and their future in work. These are foregrounded by neo-liberal capitalist developments that broaden the divide between North and South, rich and poor, East and West, men and women, black and white, heteronormative and other, etc. These gaps continue to grow as wealth is accumulated in the hands of a few while the majority live in poverty, and while richer countries and their corporate allies control the agendas and direction of international institutions and their policy prescriptives, primarily in the global South. Women’s work ties into global intersectional divides across race, class, gender and region.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The Association for Women’s Rights in Development points out that the “technological developments of recent decades — ranging from the Internet and satellites to robotics and genetic manipulation of crops — have transformed women’s work, both in terms of how they perform work tasks on a daily basis and the types of work women do” (2004). There is sufficient evidence to confirm that the world’s wealthy, those at the top of the income, skills, and wealth spectrums, have far more to gain from the introduction of new technology than those in poorer sections of society. In fact, technological advances may not reach a vast majority of African women as the digital divide remains gendered. According to UN Women (2018) most of the 3.9 billion people who are off-line are in rural areas, are poor, under-educated, and female.

A World Economic Forum 2016 report predicted that 7 million jobs could disappear in five years, with women being most affected as they are less likely to be working in sectors where the adoption of new technology will create jobs. Women may lose five jobs for every job gained, while men lose three jobs for every job gained (WEF 2016). A 2016 UN study indicated that “sewbots” could soon replace up to 80 percent of garment factory jobs in Asia, most of which are already low-paying jobs in economies where other employment options for women are limited. Although information on Africa’s automation remains scant, one report predicts that 35 percent of jobs in South Africa are currently at risk of total automation (Anderson 2018). While South Africa is generally not a good determinant for a Continental perspective, given its relative wealth and industrial sectors when compared to other countries on the Continent.

It has been argued that technological advances should not be viewed cynically since automation is an objective process with emancipatory potential, and opportunities exist in data mining and other high-risk sectors for improving labour inspection systems, monitoring working conditions, ensuring labour-law compliance in supply chains, etc. (Firdausi 2018). However, we need to guard against certain impacts on economies in the global South, particularly in relation to precarity, increased unemployment, greater income inequality, exacerbated poverty, labour force polarisation, and repression of progressive technologies. These hazards abound in an economic model that is based on systemic exploitation, and that negatively impacts women.

If we overcome simplified technological determinism and start to look at technologies as being embedded in social and political structures, we can better understand the potential impact of technological advancements, and also provide informed suggestions on how to shape public policies in order to combine innovation and dynamism with greater social well-being. Revolution implies a total transformation of society. If technological and scientific changes advanced through the 4IR are to realise their revolutionary potential, they will have to be accompanied by meaningful social and political transformations embedded in a new economic, social, and political common sense.

GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN PUSHES

The globalisation of trade has seen a proliferation of so-called ‘free trade’ deals and the rapid expansion of corporate supply chains as multinationals seek out ever lower production and labour costs in countries in the global South (Oxfam 2004; ITUC 2016). Women are still over-represented in informal and precarious work arrangements, including at the bottom of global supply chains, which now command 60 percent of global production, transport, and services.

According to the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) (not dated), approximately 190 million women work in global supply chains – in the factories, farms, and packing houses that supply the world’s clothing, goods, and food. For many women, these jobs offer a promise of economic independence and the hope of a better future for themselves and their children. The reality, however, is that they must work excessive hours, often in difficult, unsafe and exploitative conditions, and their wages that are not enough to make ends meet. Women workers often face discrimination in pay, in the types of jobs they are given, and in opportunities for skills training and promotion. They are often subject to sexual harassment and gender-based violence at work. Because women often carry most of the responsibility for their families and households, inflexible working hours and excessive overtime have a major impact on their health and the well-being of their families.

Some leading companies are seeking to improve gender equality across their supply chains (ETI not dated). They are doing this for two reasons: firstly, they recognise their UN Guiding Principles responsibilities to respect human rights, and to prevent and remedy harm caused to women workers; and secondly, greater gender diversity may facilitate commercial success above that of their competitors. Many transnational companies have established codes of labour practice in their global supply chains that are based on key ILO conventions. But while voluntary codes have had some positive effects in improving health and safety standards, there has been limited progress in demonstrating less-visible but critical enabling rights, particularly freedom of association and non-discrimination.

Companies needed to understand the impact of their actions on women in their global supply chains. They need to recognise the value of engaging with civil society organisations and trade unions, and most importantly, of listening to the needs of women workers. More needs to be done to organise global production processes in fairer and more just ways, and to strengthen union organisation and representation for women workers.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental degradation, evident in landslides, floods, and hurricanes, has short-term effects on everyone. But, long-term effects harm women more than men. Changes in the natural environment impact women workers who have

strong roles in the protection and rehabilitation of the environment (Huynh 2018). Studies have shown that in natural disaster emergencies, 70 to 80 percent of those needing assistance are women and children. According to the UN Women Watch (2010), there are multiple factors that make women more vulnerable to adverse effects of climate change. For example, when women's daily tasks include collecting fuelwood, dung, water, food, and medicinal plants, deterioration of the local environment or loss of access to resources make women's work more difficult. They have to travel further, carry heavier loads, and work longer hours to meet their daily needs. Women living in poverty have limited resources to cope with the consequences of environmental degradation, and have very little to do with its perpetuation.

The exploitation of natural resources and the practices of extractive industries also have harmful impacts on women. Approximately 30 percent of the world's known mineral reserves is located on the African continent. Once mined, most of the minerals are exported to other parts of the world where they are used to manufacture consumer and industrial goods (Randriamaro 2018). The extractivist model, which dates back to colonialism, reaps massive profits for global capital without providing commensurate social and economic benefits for local communities. In particular, the associated privatisation and pollution of land, water, and natural resources have especially disruptive and damaging effects on the health and livelihoods of rural women (*ibid*).

An estimated 60-100 billion US dollars each year is lost from African countries through illicit financial flows (IFFs) directed by corporations into tax havens. In many instances, IFFs exceed both foreign direct investments and development assistance. In 2015, Ghana successfully approached the IMF for a three-year bailout of 930 million US dollars, while annually losing 1.4 billion US dollars a year to IFFs. Trade misinvoicing, which involves representing values of export goods as well below their actual worth, plays a huge part in facilitating IFFs from extractive commodities such as precious metals and oil from Southern Africa and Nigeria, as well as agricultural goods such as cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire.

In both developed and developing nations, women are still under-represented in roles that contribute to the decision-making process of environmental protection and climate change strategies. Both gender justice and environmental justice demand gender-sensitive strategies that protect the environment and stop perpetuating gender inequality. But most importantly, it is not possible to engage in a meaningful discussion on the future of work on the African continent without confronting corporate exploitation and foreign capital accumulation more generally.

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AT THE WORK PLACE AND IN LIFE

Every day, women around the world are making an invaluable contribution to the global economy through their paid

and unpaid labour. Far too often, their work is carried out in a context of harassment and the threat of violence.

Women endure violence and discrimination simply because they are women. Socially ascribed gender roles and responsibilities enable this injustice to continue. (Action Aid 2017; CARE International 2017). Women's experiences influences, and is in turn influenced by, the social, political, cultural and economic spheres of capitalist patriarchal systems. Patriarchy manifests itself in every governance mechanism, system, and structure, with profound impacts on women and girls. The exploitation of the lower status and power of women and girls exacerbates their discrimination and oppression, intensifying their experience of violence, reducing their resilience to it, and creating new forms and sites of violence and discrimination.

It is widely reported that one in three women globally will experience violence in their lifetimes (Action Aid 2017). Action Aid International refers to women's experiences as the "twin injustices" and argues that women's economic inequality and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are manifestations of the global community's failure to tackle the systemic and structural causes of gender inequality (2017: 3). SGBV remains one of the most tolerated violations of workers' human rights. Over a third of women (35 percent or 818 million women globally) over the age of 15 have experienced sexual or physical violence at home, in their community, or in their workplace. While violence affects women from all walks of life – no matter how economically empowered – women living in poverty can be especially prone to exploitation and cyclically more vulnerable to economic exploitation. (Action Aid 2017).

Policy-makers too often treat SGBV in isolation, as something that mainly occurs at an interpersonal level within the private sphere of the home or family. As result, policies have tended to respond to violence, discrimination, and injustice through legal reforms or judicial approaches. While these approaches are necessary, they fail to address patriarchy and are unable to end SGBV, gendered economic discrimination, and the lack of state and corporate accountability.

Ultimately, there can be no decent work with violence at work. An end to violence, in the workplace and at home, must be part of our vision for the future of work.

SHRINKING DEMOCRATIC AND CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE: WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE

It is widely accepted that states can no longer be relied upon to protect citizens; and that transnational, non-state actors are exerting increased influence, though often behind-the-scenes. The role of non-state actors has proven far more challenging than it should be. There has been a steady decline in rights and freedoms internationally, often justified on the grounds of combatting terrorism, dealing with rogue elements, or defending people and nations. Declining rights

include limitations on freedom of expression, association and collective bargaining; cumbersome registration processes for civil society organisations; funding restrictions; state surveillance; and policy brutality and harassment, detention, torture and in some instances murder (Action Aid 2018). In contrast, corporate actors have heightened power and privilege. New technologies present a double-edged sword as they facilitate voice and citizen mobilisation in powerful new ways; yet they provide equally powerful tools to monitor and restrict the legitimate activities of civil society (Figueroa 2018).

The current global crackdown on civil society presents cause for concern as it threatens a major pillar of social and economic development. An Action Aid International report points to how the increasing restrictions on civil society space “are particularly worrying given the vital role of women’s rights organisations and feminist movements in pushing for the elimination of violence and defending women’s economic and wider rights” (2018). A recent 70-country study found “that women’s organising and activism have advanced women’s legal status and rights in most areas, particularly in relation to women’s legal status at work. In the same vein, women’s exposure to violence at work is reportedly higher where trade unions are non-existent.” (*ibid*).

Here it is also important to mention the rise of extremist and far-right groups. “In a bid to suppress hard-won rights for women and other marginalised people, [far-right] groups deploy racist, xenophobic and sexist narratives based on religion, culture and tradition. Such conservative interests are increasingly infiltrating governments and international decision-making bodies, such as the UN. Here they exert their influence on policies and resourcing for women’s rights, while reinforcing narrow, traditional notions... [hampering] women’s chances of realising their economic rights and living a life free from violence” (Action Aid 2018).

A study by Forum Syd indicates that while civil society was poised to assist achieving the UN’s 2030 Agenda, including localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), protecting rights and promoting accountability, and providing valuable monitoring functions, “the extent to which the sector is under threat in a large number of countries suggest that this may not be the case, as some governments attempt to block out civil society altogether” (2017).

If this trend in repressing civil society is not reversed, in many parts of the world civil society organisations, and trade unions in particular, will be unable to promote social, environmental, economic, and human rights. The consequences for the advancement of a feminist future of work is profound.

4

AN AFRICAN FEMINIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE FUTURE OF WORK

Social and economic justice for women requires transforming women's work. Predictions of radical change in the world of work as a result of the 4IR may be exaggerated, but the 'revolution' still presents an opportunity for structuring the world of work in a more gender equitable way.

What does this mean for shaping a feminist vision in the gender order of the future of work? The following proposed 12 critical initiatives could not only mitigate any immediate negative impacts for African women in work but also harness the potential to make positive steps toward gender equality.

POINT 1 FEMINIST POLITICAL ACTION

We run the risk of tinkering around the edges if we don't tackle the structural roots of gender discrimination and inequality. This requires shaping the future of work through feminist political actions that challenge the dominant capitalist economic model which holds profit-making as its fundamental goal and which sustains patriarchal norms.

Critical question: *How do we advance a progressive feminist agenda for building a just and equitable society?*

POINT 2 A DECENT AND SUSTAINABLE WORK AGENDA

There should be no tradeoffs between job creation and job quality. There is a need for a dedicated focus on women who have historically remained excluded from social justice and decent work, notably those working in the informal economy and in precarious employment. This must be coupled with innovative actions to address the growing diversity of situations in which work is performed, in particular the emerging phenomenon of digitally-mediated work in the platform economy, and the rise of non-standard contracts. The ILO Commission on the Future of Work recommended a universal labour guarantee as an appropriate tool to deal with these challenges, along with incentives to promote investments in key areas for decent and sustainable work (ILO 2019).

Critical question: *How can the agenda for decent and sustainable work be increasingly feminised and centred?*

POINT 3 EMPLOYMENT FOR EMPOWERMENT

There is mounting evidence that women's ability to enjoy their human rights and exit poverty is integrally linked to their economic empowerment (UN Women 2018). Therefore, creating employment opportunities for women is a common development strategy. However, it is important that such strategies focus on the provision of decent jobs that are empowering, safe, and supportive of women's full rights. This is particularly necessary given that women's lack of education and training, along with gender bias in labour markets, gives many women no option but to take on low-paid and precarious work, which locks them into economic insecurity. Further, the favoured approaches of donors, multilateral institutions, and a growing number of corporations are focused on improving women's access to credit, supporting women entrepreneurs, or increasing women's labour force participation. These approaches do not get to the heart of how economic policies and processes, shaped by capitalist patriarchal norms, constrain women's economic choices and rights and, in many cases, increase their exposure to violence.

Critical question: *What realisable employment opportunities can we consider and explore for meaningful and structural shifts for women workers?*

POINT 4 AMBITIOUS INDUSTRIAL STRATEGIES

No country or region in the world has achieved prosperity and a decent standard of living for its citizens without a robust industrial sector (African Development Bank Group 2018). There needs to be an orientation of energies and efforts towards effective industrial strategies that contribute towards structural change, that are state supported, and that contribute directly to job creation and sustainable equity enhancement for women. Efforts must also include shifts towards more labour-intensive production in order to retain and create decent jobs; improved production of basic necessities in order to raise living standards while expanding the domestic market; and increased equality in terms of ownership of capital and other assets in order to improve overall equality and ensure more equitable spatial development. Such efforts will require strongly integrated and cooperative

regional systems to complement development plans, and investments to enhance local capacity and raise the quality of the public education sector.

Critical question: *What practical contributions/efforts can be advanced for ensuring both gender mainstreaming in industrial strategies, but more specifically for women centred/led industrial strategy propositions?*

POINT 5 PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

Governments are responsible for implementing policy and improving women's rights and access to opportunities on a gendered basis. Family support policies, which aim to improve work/life balance, rights to paid leave and return to equivalent work, as well as affordable childcare services for working parents, are known to have made a substantial contribution to raising participation rates of women in work, and especially those of mothers. Yet many government institutions, departments, and agencies with responsibility for the development and implementation of relevant policies have limited understanding of the systemic nature of discrimination against women, and lack the requisite will to effect change. Further, there is a paucity of information available in Africa (aside from in South Africa), to develop a holistic picture of women in the labour market as a basis for thoughtful consideration on women and the future of work. It is therefore important to develop mechanisms that help put the gendered policy debate on solid empirical footing.

Critical question: *What can be done to build capacity and advocacy for public policy initiatives, including accurate and available data, that help frame feminist visions on the future of work?*

POINT 6 SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The world of work begins at home, where men and women lead unequal lives due to the imbalanced distribution of social reproductive labour. From parental leave to investment in public care services, policies need to foster the sharing of unpaid care work in the private and public spheres in order to create genuine equality of workplace opportunities. Women in all societies are more involved in unpaid care work than men, though the amount this work varies between countries and groups according to class, family size, social norms, and the availability of substitute services. A woman's position in the labour market is inextricably linked to experiences in the home.

The prospects for gender equality arising from the 4IR depend on the position of women and men in the division of both paid and unpaid work (Howcroft and Rubery 2018). We need to rethink social processes that produce labour power in both the public and private spheres. Already a plethora of approaches towards 'equalising' domestic, reproductive, and care arrangements exist. These include re-

ductions in working hours, changes to the nature and quality of work, changes to the employment relationship, flexible work, living wages at reduced hours without a decrease on overall wage share, reduction in wages for higher income earners, household compensation, changes to access to work during the period of childbirth and childrearing, income grants and other state subsidisation mechanisms for childcare, challenges to expectations about who holds responsibility for paid and unpaid labour, and the socialization of support for reproductive care (*ibid*).

Critical question: *How do we realistically rethink paid and unpaid work to provide wider benefits for women?*

POINT 7 THE SOCIAL WAGE

The future of work requires a strong and responsive social protection system, based on the principles of solidarity and risk sharing, which supports people's needs over their life cycle. Such support requires a basic level of social protection to everyone in need, complemented by contributory social insurance schemes that provide increased levels of protection. Social protections must be expanded to include those currently excluded, such as those employed in precarious work. Unemployment protection could be coupled with policies to replace income losses in phases of unemployment and accelerate reintegration into employment. In Africa in particular, an adequate social wage is necessary for workers to fight poverty, to close racialised and gender wage gaps, and to tackle systemic inequalities.

In addition to the demand for industrial strategies and employment that is empowering there have been calls for: legislated minimum wages to set the basic living standard; the regulation of executive pay in order to close the racialised and gender pay gaps; systems of progressive taxation which require the rich to pay more taxes; disclosure of company profits, executive pay and bonuses; decent housing centred around the densification of human settlements and the location of affordable housing closer to workplaces; access to land and to free/affordable, safe, quality healthcare, education and public transport; equalising domestic, reproductive and care arrangements; retirement provision/reforms; and protective, fair and equalising labour legislation.

Critical question: *What should be done to both develop and advance a social wage centred on women workers and grounded in feminist principles?*

POINT 8 INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE'S CAPABILITIES

Governments, workers and employers, as well as educational institutions, have complementary responsibilities for building an effective and appropriately-financed lifelong learning ecosystem. Learning environments must provide for what is required to build a socially-just society centered around the feminist principles, and must be complemented with invest-

ments in public institutions, policies and strategies that will support people through future of work transitions. Young people will need help in navigating the increasingly difficult school-to-work transition. Older workers will need expanded choices that enable them to remain economically active as long as they choose, and that will create an active and meaningful society. All workers will need support and skill-development over the course of their lives to navigate, and remain employed throughout, the increasing number of labour market transitions.

Given the growing demand for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) knowledge and skills, the issue of low representation of women workers within STEM fields needs to be addressed. This is significant given the likelihood of reduced opportunities for women workers in this area as a consequence of changes to the future of work.

Critical question: *What work is needed to increase women and girls' educational attainment in a way that ensures better labour market outcomes and more specifically that contributes to their participation in the formal labour market?*

POINT 9 INTERNATIONAL LABOUR STANDARDS AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN WORKERS

Feminists have repeatedly drawn attention to the general male bias inherent in the formulation of international human rights principles, including those relating to international labour standards. In line with the approach adopted by the ILO in its 1998 Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, a set of labour standards has been defined as Core Labour Standards (CLS) with the elevated status as fundamental and inalienable human rights. The CLS include freedom from forced labour; freedom from child labour; freedom from discrimination at work; and freedom of association.

Occupational health and safety, social security, maternity protection, and other labour standards which have implications for women workers are subordinated as substantive labour standards. While ideally CLS should serve as the foundation for achieving more comprehensive labour standards protection, there is an increasing lag between CLS and substantive labour standards. This lag is more pronounced for women in the labour market, and in particular for those in the global South.

Critical question: *Is freedom from discrimination sufficient to protect and advance women's empowerment at work?*

POINT 10 CORPORATE CODES OF CONDUCT, GLOBAL FRAME AGREEMENTS, AND SOCIAL CLAUSES

Corporate codes of conduct outline corporate commitments to basic rights and minimum standards affecting workers,

communities, and the environment. Increasingly, some cover the labour practices of company suppliers. Most codes include provisions on CLS and worker health and safety. Being voluntary in nature and characterised by self-regulation, it is often the companies' own personnel who are responsible for monitoring compliance with their code, with selective involvement of local NGOs, human rights organizations or 'social auditing' firms. Codes of conduct are often criticized as mere public relations tools, doing little to change actual working conditions.

Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) are negotiations between global trade unions, federations, and multinational companies that set labour standards for global operations. In most instances GFAs contain provisions incorporating CLS and limited health, safety, and environmental standards, but rarely contain any protections specific to women workers.

Increasingly, 'social clauses' have found their way into regional and bilateral agreements especially those pursued by the EU and the USA. Again, the emphasis has been on CLS and selected health, safety and environmental protections. Yet the inclusion of social clauses as a measure to enforce labour standards in trade agreements has remained controversial at a multilateral level at the WTO. There is also reluctance from a significant number of countries from the global South which consider the availability of cheap labour as a comparative advantage against trade partners.

While women workers have been able to secure more comprehensive labour standard protections (either through collective bargaining or legislation), this has tended to be at the national level and concentrated in wealthy, industrialised countries.

Critical question: *Does the transnational enforcement agenda adequately reflect the interests of women workers in the global South?*

POINT 11 A CONTINUED ROLE FOR SOCIAL DIALOGUE

Forging new paths around the future of work requires committed action on the part of governments, and of employers' and workers' organisations. "They need to reinvigorate the social contract that gives working people a just share of economic progress. Social dialogue can play a key role in ensuring the relevance of this contract to managing the changes under way when all the actors in the world of work participate fully, including the many millions of workers who are currently excluded" (ILO 2019).

The ILO argues for what they call a 'universal labour guarantee', which would include fundamental workers' rights and a guaranteed set of basic working conditions. Freedom from forced labour, child labour and discrimination, and freedom of association and the effective right to collective bargaining must be guaranteed no matter what form work takes, and regardless of contractual arrangement or employment sta-

tus. For all workers, guaranteed working conditions must include an adequate living wage, limits on hours of work, and safe and healthy workplaces. Putting the Universal Labour Guarantee into practice as a minimum standard would require governments to subscribe to it, and employers' associations and trade unions to enforce it. Social dialogue may still be the best tool to manage these changes and to guarantee a decent work agenda in the current period.

Critical question: *With increased precarity, the decline of centralised bargaining, and fragmentation of trade unions posing serious challenges to social dialogue, what safeguards should be implemented to ensure that women in trade unions are able to meaningfully engage in social dialogue?*

POINT 12 UNIONS AND WOMEN'S WORKER ORGANISATIONS

Anner et al. in their 'For a Future of Work with Dignity' paper claim that there is "ample evidence showing that the changing forms of work are undermining workers' voices; [and that] it is crucial to respond to this through a combination of effective regulation and efforts to promote representative workers' organisations" (2019). The collective agency of workers, probably more than any other group, has the potential to ensue debates on the future of work. After all, despite persistent inequalities, unions have led efforts to break occupational segregation, close the gender pay gap, enhance women's access to social protection, and promote women's access to paid formal work. Where unions have either failed to recognise or represent women and marginalised women's issues, alternative organisations have emerged.

The collective organising efforts need to be harnessed and brought together in complementary alliances and networks with those doing feminist work within the same or similar values base, and with those whose aims are centred around challenging corporate exploitation and destructive models of accumulation, extraction, profit, and consumption.

Critical question: *How do we identify and effectively harness strategic partnerships with organisations, alliances, and networks that share values and vision but that may not be based on traditional alliances or linkages?*

5

CONCLUSION

This is an impulse paper written with an intersectional approach which considers class, gender, race, age, and region. We put forward reflections, ideas, and propositions for debate and critical engagement. The paper includes analysis of core economic issues defining the status of women in Africa, focusing on the realities of industrialisation; the African labour market's gender and class divide; the location and position of African women and their lack of access to land, jobs, resources, education; and the burden of women in relation to the infrastructure deficits on the continent. Overall we illustrate how African women continue to face significant obstacles in gaining access to decent work, dignity, and the living standards they deserve, with the impacts on younger women being far more acute.

What will neoliberal globalisation deliver for women and the people of Africa? By sketching the current environment for women in Africa and the impact of new technologies, we predict a relatively unchanged global reality for women in Africa, and argue for the development of a feminist framework and discourse that centers alternatives based on principles of social justice and ecological sustainability. We offer reflections on a feminist vision for the future of work and a decent future for all workers, and women workers in particular.

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GLOSSARY TERMS

4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
ADBG	African Development Bank Group
CLS	Core Labour Standards
ETI	Ethical Trading Initiative
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GFA	Global Framework Agreements
IFF	Illicit financial flows
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	Information Technology
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UN	United Nations
WB	World Bank
WEF	World Economic Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization

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"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

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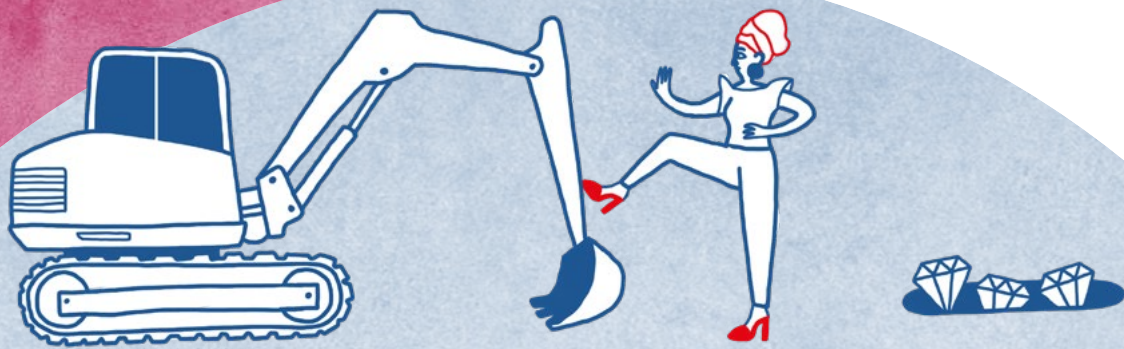
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FEMINIST VISIONS OF THE FUTURE OF WORK: AFRICA



African women continue to face significant obstacles in gaining access to decent work, dignity, and the living standards they deserve, with the impacts on younger women being far more acute.



Technological advances may not reach a vast majority of African women as the digital divide remains gendered. The main obstacles to gender equity in digital inclusion in Africa include lack of access and affordability; lack of education, skills and technological literacy; gender-based structural and cultural inequalities; and the under-development of the overall digital ecosystem and the barriers that exist in establishing the necessary digital infrastructure.



A feminist framework and discourse should provide alternatives based on principles of social justice and ecological sustainability. A feminist vision can mitigate negative impacts for African women in work but also harness the potential to make positive steps toward gender equality.



For further information on this topic:

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