Women & the Digital Economy

The transformation of the global marketplace from an analog to a digital sphere is radically impacting the lives of women and girls. The digital economy can reduce the gap between men and women in the economic sphere, or increase it, depending on cultures and acquired skills. Feminists see this development as a mixed blessing. While many activists and thinkers consider expanding the digital world can be a source of new opportunities to challenge patriarchy, others see the narrow focus on profit maximization by the global capitalist economy, under which the digital economy is operating, as a source of intensifying and even generating new forms of gendered oppression and exploitation. Can the **Fourth Industrial Revolution**, accompanied by the **Fourth-Wave Feminism**, help bridge the **gender gap**?

Definitions

The Digital Economy

The commodification of information is the pillar of the digital economy. It's about transforming text, images, and sound into products and thus turning messages into money! It is also referred to as the E-Economy, Internet Economy, or Web Economy. Traditional liberal economic theory championed the free flow of four commodities: goods, services, capital, and people. The internet and digital innovation allowed us to buy and sell traditional 'hardware' in cyberspace, including human labor. Notably, the merchandise was offered via the computer screen, however, the actual products were analog (referred to as 'bricks-and-mortar' stores). Meaning they were still largely tangible, hard objects which we could actually grasp with our hands. Digitalization transforms the traditional liberal free market into pixels and electronic impulses. Messages contained in magazines, films, music, or design joined the market, thus creating a total list of five commodities: goods, services, capital, people, and information (data). On the globalized free market everything is for sale.

Fourth Industrial Revolution (also called 'Industry 4.0')

Historically, the industrial revolution was driven by the steam engine and electric motor; which was followed by several other revolutions and discoveries which led to computers, the internet, in addition to information and communication technologies (ICT). Currently we are witnessing the results of a multifaceted and interconnected transformation. It is bringing together digital, physical and biological structures. This paradigm shift is changing industries, companies and entire societies. It is characterized by big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI), thus transferring the complexity of our social and personal lives onto online platforms.

Fourth-Wave Feminism

This phase of the women's movement is characterized by a focus on the digital empowerment, intersectionality, and the use of internet tools. It builds on the First Wave Feminism, with women fighting primarily for equal treatment with men in areas such as education, voting rights, and the industrial workplace; Second-Wave Feminism which focused on women's control over their own bodies, the role of gender in the family, and the uniqueness of the female and male experience; and Third-Wave Feminism which challenged the dominance of white middle class women and is best known for the introduction of the concept of 'intersectionality' which

links gender, race, class, age, sexuality, disabilities, to understand the multi-layered oppression that different women face. In the 2010s, the Fourth Wave took all of this online and dovetailed with the Industry 4.0.

Facts and Figures

- **According** to an International Labor Organization (ILO) report there is an increase of women pursuing higher education globally, however the gender gap in employment rates remains high among highly educated women and men in many countries.
- **According** to Global Findex, only 35 percent of women in the MENA region have a bank account compared to 52 percent for men.
- **Although** globally women managers are more likely to have a higher level of education than men managers, (statistics show that 44.3 per cent of female managers have an advanced university degree compared with 38.3 per cent of male managers) income and career advancement disparities remain stubbornly in place.
- **According** to a European commission study, the share of men working in the digital sector within Europe is 3.1 times greater than the share of women.
- **Studies** in the European Union show that the increased participation of women in the tech sector would boost the European economy by around 16 billion Euros and give women the chance to fully participate in society.
- **According** to the International Development Research Centre, the overall digital gap between women and men in the Arab region has been declining. However, with 18% this disparity in the use and access of digital tools is still higher than other parts of the Global South.
- **Surveys** for technology companies in Silicon Valley show that the applicant pool for technical jobs in artificial intelligence (AI) and data science is often less than 1 per cent female.
- **Girls** and young women are still underrepresented in STEM education, which is particularly in demand for emerging careers across the region.
- **A survey** by the European Commission in 2018 demonstrated that women's enrolment in ICT-related studies has declined in the EU since 2011, while related job opportunities have increased.
- **Digital** technologies can hinder women's access to jobs. Research results by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) show that 11 percent of jobs held by women are at risk of elimination due to artificial intelligence and internet of things.