

## **A feminist design manifesto for the future of work in the Global South**

Payal Arora and Usha Raman

Founders of [FemLab.co](https://femlab.co)

Networks of labor—both formal and informal—are intricately linked to the myriad webs of power and consumption that fuel the planetary system. The digital and data infrastructures that drive the world economy, and shape and funnel information flows, also affect the lives of workers far removed from Wall Street and Silicon Valley. As socioeconomic and financial systems become digital in the Global South, we need to ask who and what determines how women workers are represented and reproduced on the Internet, how communities are formed and sustained, and whether and what kinds of change are possible.

Feminist design has at the heart of its objective the re-ordering of the social and political world, a refashioning of the tools we use to see, explain, and interact with it. At a more fundamental level, designing communication infrastructures that realize such a vision would draw directly from the lives of women and other marginalized groups that occupy the peripheral regions of the network. Shifting the conversation and the action to an inclusive approach to technology development would require the active participation and re-education of multiple actors across the value chain, from policymakers to corporations to developers. This roadmap would have the characteristics listed below—namely, it would be:

1. **Insight Driven:** Recognizing the complex and layered realities of the most disadvantaged workers in global value chains—women—and understanding how communication technologies could both empower and complicate their lives. For instance, among the poor, mobile phones are often a shared resource, with the woman having the least right of access and little privacy or control over use. Carving out time and acquiring the capacity for meaningful and productive use of technology would necessitate advocating for contextual change. In other words, design would need to account for the social and cultural dimensions of use, while imagining the consequences of shifting power dynamics within the home, in workspaces, among peer groups, and in relation to the state.
2. **Engagement Driven:** Based on a deep understanding of vocabulary and affect, how might we co-create a narrative of change with marginalized women? Can visual and aural forms be used to include these women in setting terms and demanding responsibility from

employers? Can such vocabularies then become elements of technological interfaces that engage rather than alienate? Action research and digital storytelling can be powerful tools to aid in this process. Audio-visual and immersive storytelling play an important role in building collaboration by highlighting key messages from the marginalized majority, showcasing different points of view and signposting blind-spots that can otherwise be left out through purely textual formats. We can take a page from Kolb's (2014) five steps of design—empathize, define the problem, ideate, prototype, and testing—to translate insights into outreach for change.

3. **Design Driven:** Design assumes a thinking-from-above mindset, an approach that architects change from above. However, feminist design is about thinking bottom-up. It begins with the imagination of social justice as it may be experienced, not conceptualized. In practical terms, for women in the informal labor force, it is prompted by questions of fairness, equity, and care, and the infrastructures that would have to be put in place that realize these values. This addresses specific issues such as making visible the cultures of servitude that limit professionalization (such as in the domestic work sector in Southeast Asia) to working through the oppressions of family, to broader questions of privacy, data gaps, and algorithmic control.

Women workers who are at the bottom of global value chains are in fact the most crucial links in the global poverty chain. Creative use of technology that is thoughtfully designed and sensitively implemented can go a long way in building women's capacity to create nurturing work communities. Such collectives can advocate for the kinds of changes that are collaboratively agreed upon and can build toward a more just, equitable future.

### **Acknowledgment**

FemLab.Co is a seed-funded initiative by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as part of their Future of Work series. IDRC Project Number-Component Number: 109331-001. This is drawn from an upcoming paper, Arora, Payal, and Raman, Usha. (Forthcoming). "Fair Work, Feminist Design, and Women's Labor Collectives." In *Digital Work in the Planetary Market*, edited by Mark Graham and Fabian Ferrari. Cambridge, MA/Ottawa: MIT Press/IDRC.

