CONSTRUCTION

SANITATION

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Feminist Approaches to
Labour
Collectives

PROGRESS
REPORT

JANUARY - JULY 2020

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Background

The complexity of global supply chains has led to a lack of transparency and monitoring practices meant to ensure fair working conditions. Factories and other production/service sites often operate in developing countries where labor is cheap and regulations are weak or challenging to enforce. Some industries like the textile business, handicrafts, and sanitation are examples of sectors that are female intensive, with women constituting the majority of their workforce. Given this global/local labor operation, communication between female workers, employers, non-governmental organizations and other vested intermediaries remains a challenge.

This challenge is experienced in particular ways by women in these contexts, given the manner in which globalised markets add a layer of precarity over existing gender-related inequalities. Hazardous working conditions are a marker of the global sweatshop regime, particularly in South Asia. Complicating this, women are more vulnerable due to gender and internal hierarchical structures, leading to harassment and violence, whether verbal or physical, and pressures to increase their productivity.

This study examines how issues such as violations of workers' rights, women's rights to maternity leave, sexual harassment at the workplace, forced/bonded labor and child labor could be articulated by women workers through a process of conscientization (through awareness creation) and reported directly from them to the top of the supply chain. This research will be carried out by exploring how women workers constituting the informal labour force in Bangladesh and India use crowdsourcing platforms and social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp to build collective agency through everyday communicative practice of their grievances. Through in-depth interviews of female workers and other stakeholders across five sectors (sanitation, garments, salon/personal grooming, home-based artisans and construction), content analysis of digital engagements, and innovative digital storytelling action research, this project aims to create an understanding of how these tools can include female workers at the bottom of supply chains into the larger conversation.

The project strives to build empathy through public outreach activity, and to foster accountability and corporate social responsibility. The research is expected to guide programmers and designers in their understanding of how their tools can enable female workers in the Global South in their collectivization efforts, with a particular interest in understanding the lived reality of women workers and the possibilities offered by such platforms to bring together and amplify their voices.

Context

The project operates at two levels. At the *macro* level, we are attempting to understand and map the global value chain in the sectors of interest, through interviews with key stakeholders and decision makers. At the micro level, our interest is in gaining a deep understanding of the communicative ecologies within which women workers in the informal labour force within the sectors of interest. Our project spans two regions: Chittagong and Dhaka in Bangladesh, and Hyderabad in India. Both these regions have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and many sectors have experienced either a complete shut down or a considerable slowing down as workers have been forced to stay home or return to their villages, in the case of internal migrants. The pandemic has made visible new challenges in employment and security, particularly in relation to precarious work contexts such as those we are interested in studying. These range from broadening the scope of social security, employer responsibility, and workers' rights in such emergency situations, to humanitarian considerations that require widening the stakeholder group.

Gender inclusion and analysis

At this stage in the project we cannot offer any specific insights as field work is yet to take place, but the entire framework is predicated on a gender-focused analysis. Our field work will engage with women workers in the selected sectors, attempting to understand their issues as workers and as women, and the specific legal, structural, and ethical issues that need to be considered as we build more inclusive communicative platforms that address their needs.

Research Ethics

Our application for ethics approval will be submitted to Institutional Review Boards in each of the participating institutions--Erasmus University, University of Hyderabad and Chittagong University, in March 2021, in advance of the field work. Any queries and amendments to the research plan will be taken into consideration at that point. However, in preparing our proposal, we have made a fairly detailed examination of the possible ethical issues and the ways in which we will address them, including such areas as participant anonymity, data security and sensitivity to specific vulnerabilities in relation to employment and domestic situations.

Policy engagement and impact

This will become clearer as the project progresses and insights from our fieldwork can be used to plan policy level engagement. We are currently identifying stakeholders at the global level of the value chain and interviews with this group will give us a sense of the policy and regulatory space and the possible points of intervention. In addition, insights gained from the field will be applied to 1) design ethical platforms, 2) create digital storytelling campaigns/outreach and 3) make accessible legal services via visual contracts and toolkits.

Project implementation and management

As mentioned above, the disruption caused by the Cocid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown have precluded engagement with the "ultimate beneficiaries" (women workers in the informal labour force) during this period. However, we have reached out to high level stakeholders and are in the process of conducting interviews with individuals at this level.

Research progress

The project is in the initial stages of formative research, with field-based activity having to be postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in most parts of India and Bangladesh. However, considerable desk-based research has been accomplished during this period, including an ongoing literature review and stakeholder analysis across the sectors of interest. The outputs from the research to date are described later in this report. We are currently on track with our desk research and publications and report on the stakeholder site/ context analysis. We are using this time to conduct interviews with our global stakeholders for this year and have added the weekly blog series to enhance our project and also knowledge circulation, not just for the public but also internally for our team that is spread across three countries and 6 cities.

Project outputs and dissemination (Jan-July 2020)

Reports

(Due Aug 31): FemLab.Co Team: *Stakeholder Report: Mapping platforms and employment development of selected sectors and sites in Bangladesh and India.*

Publications

(2020): Arora, Payal: *Unchain the human in the Global Value Chain*. Chapter in The Great Redesign. Accenture and [NEXT publication](#) (in German and in English/ ebook and print)

(In process). Sai Amulya Komarraju[1] Payal Arora[2], and Usha Raman[2]: Agency and servitude in platform labour. In Andrea L. Guzman and Simone Natale (eds) Special Issue 'Reclaiming the human in machine cultures,' *Media Culture & Society Journal*

(In process): Chinar Mehta, Arora, Payal Arora[2], and Usha Raman[2]: Collectivisation by design: Shaping the future of work through a feminist framework. Chapter in Andrea L. Guzman, Rhonda McEwen, and Steve Jones *'The SAGE Handbook of Human-Machine Communication' Sage Publications.*

Conference Presentations

[*Unchain the human in the global value chain*](#) *LIVE show with Payal Arora on Whats NEXT-Hamburg, 25.06.2020*

[*Webinar on informal labour & platform economy*](#) *with Payal Arora, Pondicherry University 12.06.2020*

[*Deconstructing the Data Gaze*](#) *Round table talk by Usha Raman, University of Hyderabad 12.05.2020*

[*The digital economy in Asia: feminist perspectives*](#) *Webinar with Payal Arora organized by Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 22.04.2020*

Media Outlets

[Technology for a social cause: TikTok and Asia's mobile-first nations](#) :CoronaBrief Blog by Payal Arora for the *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, 11.05.2020.

[Digital justice for the next billion users](#): Interview with Payal Arora for the *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, 24.03.2020.

Knowledge creation and capacity building

Blended learning innovation experiment (2020-2021). [Community for Learning and Innovation](#) Lab provides financial support to launch a blended learning webinar course for students across disciplines on the 'Ethical Design for the Future of work'

FemLab.co weekly blog by team members in this thematic area and invited external blog contributions from diverse stakeholders . We intend to continue this tradition of weekly blogging by our team and invites of diverse stakeholders including designers, developers, employers, policy makers and global thought leaders on matters close to our project to expand our readership and build capacity and understanding across segments.
- Blog post 17.07.2020: [Sharmi Surianarain](#) CIO and Julia Taylor, Storytelling Officer of [Harambee Youth Employment](#)(South Africa) on 'Domestic Work in Africa: Essential But Precarious'
- Blog post 31.07.2020: Achyutha Sharma, Lead User Researcher, [Meesho](#) 'Women resellers' success in India's gig economy'

In addition, we would like to mention that four of our [team members](#) (Sai Amulya Komarraju, Chinar Mehta, Rawshon Akhter and Siddharth de Souza) are early career researchers, and apart from their involvement in field research and documentation for the project, they are being encouraged to participate in identifying and contributing to academic publishing opportunities.

Training

EUR PhD supervision: PhD Candidate [Pallavi Bansal](#) (2020-2024) at Erasmus Faculty of Philosophy (EUR) on 'Ethical Design of location-based digital labour platforms for female workers in India.

EUR Research supervision: External researcher [Shweta Mahendra Chandrashekhar](#)at ILS Law College Pune, Maharashtra, India on 'Mobile technologies, migrant laborers and women construction workers in Pune'

Training for FemLab Team members: Stakeholder meeting workshop: 04.06.2020

Training for FemLab Team members: External invited speakers for the team: Conversation with [Farzana Nawaz,](#) 08.05.2020

Reach and Impact

While we are in the early stages of our project, the following reach and possible impact may already be expected:
- Relationship building: We have established common ground with a number of stakeholders to showcase and profile our project work including with the international think tank FES, business think-tank NEXT-Hamburg, Harambee Youth Employment NGO doing similar work but in South Africa and the platform company Meesho that is focusing on building women entrepreneurs through their India based app.

- FemLab.co [weekly blog](#) launched 3 months ago and has already doubled in readership and page views, promising a growing and influential reach. We find this encouraging in terms of knowledge dissemination and content engagement. This has led to more stakeholders wanting to work with us and be part of our project. Thereby, we have set up an external team where outside researchers can participate and help us expand our scope. We are also considering launching FemLab Conversations, a podcast series next year on this topic given this interest across these national/international networks.

Revised Work plan and Timeline

Given the lockdown, we have had to push our fieldwork for the safety of our team and our participants. Hence, we have adjusted our timeline to maximize on what we can do based on current constraints.

2020: Jan-Aug	Stakeholder assessment and desk research resulting in already a number of publications, media articles and webinars and a report by Aug 31
2020: Aug-Dec	Interviews with stakeholders in our select 5 sectors and a case study in the construction sector.
2021: Jan	Launch of FemLab Conversation podcast series
2021: Feb	Data analysis and publications of stakeholder interviews
2021: Mar-Jun	Field-level stakeholder analysis and interviews with key informants and coordinators
2021: Jul-Dec	Fieldwork and focus groups; digital storytelling
2022: Jan-Mar	Analysis and writing

IDRC support

The larger Future of Work consortium convened by IDRC has conducted two webinars/workshops since the initiation of the project, and the Organizing Digitally team has participated in both. There is the possibility of an exchange of ideas and experiences across this network, and we imagine that as our projects progress we will gain from this exchange. The New Delhi office of IDRC, and in particular Gillian Dowie, have been extremely forthcoming in answering questions and volunteering support.

Scaling up Strategy

Our scaling up strategy will be developed based on the outcomes of the action research phase, subsequent to the focus group discussions with women workers.