



**Feminist Approaches to
Labour
Collectives**

SECOND PROGRESS REPORT

AUGUST - DECEMBER 2020

Project Title: Organizing Digitally

*FemLab.Co (Public Lab name: Feminist Approaches to Labor Collectives)

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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 much 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 way globalized 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 and child care, 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 labor 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 labor 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 shutdown 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

In our stakeholder approach and analysis conducted from July-Dec 2020, we have reached out to several NGOs, activists, and designers to contribute their insights with specific focus on gender inclusion. Our team working across the five sites (construction, artisanal, garment, salon/domestic and location-based services) have been trained in the (techno)feminist theories and approaches and have already applied these paradigms in the methodological design with stakeholders. We have several publication outputs in review, blogs, and talks which share our theoretical underpinnings and applications to our cases (see in our output section). We have also addressed specific gender-related ethical issues required of the ethical guidelines of EUR and UoH which demand that we make explicit the possible gender-related harms, risks, and cautions we as researchers will take to protect our participants.

Our fieldwork is scheduled to start in mid-March 2021, with the underlying framework predicated on a gender-focused analysis. Our fieldwork 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. We will also conduct interviews with key intermediaries in each sector to understand the broader context within which women's work occurs and to identify possibilities for ground-up advocacy.

Research Ethics

Our application for ethics approval has been submitted to Institutional Review Boards in each of the participating institutions--Erasmus University, University of Hyderabad, and

Chittagong University. Erasmus University board has notified us that we will have the approval before February 25, 2021. The University of Hyderabad Ethics committee is likely to meet in the second half of February and issue approvals soon after.

Policy engagement and impact

Stakeholder engagement/impact: Through our stakeholder's outreach/analysis, we have opened a channel with the brand [Varner-Gruppen AS](#), a textile firm in Norway that will cooperate with us and help us to conduct a snowball sampling with other brands to investigate how to bolster auditing practices in factories. [Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator](#) have come on board as a FemLab.co affiliate in a cross-sharing of strategies/experiences between South Asia and Africa. Along with them, we have been invited to joined the [RSA](#) and [Autodesk Foundation network](#) that will in the forthcoming months embark on a network building project focused on key Future of Work challenges in Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. The project's aim is to identify key Future of Work trends through research, build an online directory of innovations addressing Future of Work challenges, and curate a network that will bring together different key players to identify shared challenges and nurture opportunities for peer learning and collaboration. We are also in dialogue with [UNDP \(Ministry of Change project\)](#) to bolster innovation in the future of work sector and [UNHCR](#) for policy advisement for women refugees acquiring work and using digital tools in Venezuela/Brazil borders.

Design ethical platforms: [Shrinath V.](#) the founder of The Better Product Studio and podcaster of the Next Billion User market via [Aaawaz](#) has joined us as a FemLab.co affiliate where we will cross-share insights and amplify each other's work via our networks. Another affiliate is Soumita Basu, founder of [Zyenika](#) (a range of adaptive and inclusive clothing for those with disabilities) will work with FemLab.co to help lobby platforms for inclusive design features for entrepreneurs in ecommerce and will become a regular contributor alongside Shrinath towards our blog series.

Digital storytelling/campaign outreach: Justice Adda will be starting work on their animations and illustrations for our project once the fieldwork begins. Catalyst Lab will continue with the blog series, and take the lead on the design and facilitation of the interactive open access book with [Meat Space Press](#). The contributors of the book will be invited to a roundtable event end this year where we plan on building a social media campaign around the book contributions. We are in dialogue with several university groups invested in this specific FoW in the GS area. We plan to establish academic partnerships for the roundtable event to maximize impact and outreach and bridge academia and other stakeholders such as designers, tech, and development agencies. We already have on board [Ishtiaque Ahmed](#), Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto Critical Computing Group, as a FemLab.co affiliate. We plan on jointly working on data analysis and publications and building capacity of our PhD students through joint knowledge sharing. Others in dialogue are University of Amsterdam Global Digital Cultures group, Kings College London Digital Humanities Group, and National University of Singapore Communication and New Media group.

Project implementation and management

The disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown have precluded engagement with the “ultimate beneficiaries” (women workers in the informal labor force) during this period. However, as expressed above, we have made much progress with the stakeholder outreach and analysis, including reaching out to NGOs in India and Bangladesh that work in the identified sectors and who will assist in helping us reach out to women workers.

Research progress

We have completed an internal stakeholder report to map out the sites/terrains and contacts that need to be pursued in both India and Bangladesh. We are amid stakeholder interviews with textile brands. We have also done considerable desk-based research that includes literature reviews across the sectors of interest. The outputs from the research to date are described later in this report. We will embark on fieldwork in mid-March starting with intermediaries and NGOs followed by focus groups and interviews with women workers across the selected sectors beginning April. We are on track to produce the first series of outputs of digital storytelling by Justice Adda and Catalyst Lab – via animations, toolkits, illustrations, and a social media campaign end 2021.

Project outputs and dissemination (Aug-Dec 2020)

Reports

(Dec 2020): FemLab.Co Team: *Stakeholder Report: Mapping platforms and employment development of selected sectors and sites in Bangladesh and India.*

Publications

(Forthcoming). Payal Arora, and Usha Raman: Fair Work, Feminist Design and Women’s Labor Collectives. Chapter in Mark Graham and Fabian Ferrari ‘Digital Work in the Planetary Market,’ *MIT Press*. (open access)

(In review). Sai Amulya Komaraju¹ Payal Arora², and Usha Raman²: 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 review). Chinara Mehta¹, Payal Arora², and Usha Raman²: 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.

(In review). Pallavi Bansal¹ and Payal Arora². Feminist approaches to designing location-based platforms in India. Chapter in Aditi Surie, and Ursula Huws, 'Platformization and Informality: Pathways of Change, Alteration, and Transformation.' *Palgrave MacMillian* (open access).

(2020): Juliana Guarany with Siddharth Peter de Souza: Feminist solidarity through mapping (Fem Map): Chapter in Siddharth Peter deSouza, Nida Rehman, and Saba Sharma 'Crowdsourcing, Constructing & Collaborating: Methods and Social Impacts of Mapping the World Today.' *Bloomsbury India Press*.

Conference Presentations

[Women, Work, and Voice in the Gig Economy](#) Arthan Future of Work Forum and Just Jobs Network with Payal Arora 16.12.2020

[Exploring Democratizing the future of work: Feminist approaches to digital collectives](#) Edge Session at Ministry of Change with Payal Arora, **UNDP** 27.10.2020

[Data sovereignty and data colonialism](#) Keynote Roundtable Panel with Payal Arora, Nick Couldry, Ralph Litzinger, Amir Anwar, **London School of Economics**, 02.09.2020

Media Outlets

[From Unbanked to fully Digital: A look behind Bangladesh's online money transfers](#) Mohammad Sahid Ullah for the **Dhaka Courier**, an Independent Newsweekly, 01.08.2020

[Where in India's COVID-19 Response Is the Moral Compass That Guides Governance?](#) Usha Raman for the Science: **The Wire**, 01.08.2020.

Knowledge creation and capacity building

We continue to flag opportunities to support our PhDs and early career researchers such as through conferences, publications, talks, and other media outlets. Both PI's work with each member and tailor their involvement to maximize their career choices and network building. Through the open access book and the roundtable event and other network building, we will continue to expand their visibility. As explained above, our capacity building initiatives involve the joining of strategic networks and partnering with stakeholders such as designers and development agencies and brands for furthering this goal.

Training (ongoing)

EUR PhD supervision:

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

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

India PhD supervision:

1. PhD candidate Sai Amulya Komarraju (2014-2020), University of Hyderabad, on 'Exploring intergenerational feminisms: the gendered micropolitics of everyday life'. Submitted in December 2020.
2. PhD candidate Chinara Mehta (2019-2024), 'Interface as knowledge in practice: a feminist analysis of new media development in India.'

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 what we can do based on current constraints.

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| 2020: Aug-Dec | Stakeholder assessment and desk research resulting in already a number of publications, media articles and webinars and a report by Aug 31 |
| 2021: Jan-Mar | Interviews with design/brands/govt/tech stakeholders in our select 5 sectors and a case study in the construction sector. |
| 2021: Apr-Jun | Field-level stakeholder analysis and interviews with key informants and coordinators; digital ethnography of e-commerce platforms serving garment and artisanal sectors in Bangladesh. |
| 2021: Jun-Dec | Analysis |
| 2021: Jul-Dec | Fieldwork: focus groups and in-depth interviews; inputs to digital storytelling; development of visual contracts |
| 2022: Jan-Mar | Analysis and writing |

IDRC support

The larger Future of Work consortium convened by IDRC has conducted three webinars/workshops since the initiation of the project, and the FemLab.co team has participated in all. Our project has gained insights on methods during covid-19 and other such matters from this exchange.

Scaling up Strategy

We have outlined our scaling up strategy above through the roundtable university consortium, the brands network, RSA and Autodesk, and the UNHCR/UNDP that can perhaps scale our project to other contexts in Latin America and Africa.