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Empowering women through digital skills in Argentina

A tale of two stories

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“Promoting gender equality is smart development policy,” says the World Bank. In line with this narrative, many companies have promoted gender equality in terms of bridging the gender digital divide. In Argentina, a growing number of grassroots initiatives sponsored by corporations have emerged and provide training in digital and soft skills as well as entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities. Without denying the efforts, importance, and value of the work of these groups, this paper studies some of the contradictions inherent to the increasing power that corporations have in the discourse and practice of reducing the gender digital gap. My argument is that these projects contribute to reinforcing current economic, social, and geographical divides, to discriminating against gender non-conforming people, and to further limiting government intervention in this area.

Stärkung von Frauen durch digitale Kompetenzen in Argentinien

Eine Erzählung aus zwei Perspektiven

„Die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter zu fördern, ist kluge Entwicklungspolitik“, sagt die Weltbank. Im Einklang damit fördern viele Unternehmen die Geschlechtergleichstellung im Sinne der Überwindung der digitalen Kluft zwischen den Geschlechtern. So werden in Argentinien verschiedene Graswurzelinitiativen von Unternehmen gesponsert, die Schulungen in den Bereichen soziale und digitale Kompetenzen sowie Unternehmertum und Führung anbieten. Ohne die Bemühungen, die Bedeutung und den Wert der Arbeit dieser Gruppen aberkennen zu wollen, untersucht dieser Artikel einige der Widersprüche, die sich daraus ergeben, dass Unternehmen einen zunehmenden Einfluss auf Diskurs und Praxis der Bemühungen um eine Verringerung der geschlechtsspezifischen digitalen Spaltung haben. Meine These ist, dass diese Projekte dazu beitragen, die aktuell bestehenden wirtschaftlichen, sozialen und geografischen Spaltungen zu verstärken, nicht mit klassischen Geschlechterbildern übereinstimmende Menschen zu diskriminieren und die staatlichen Maßnahmen in diesem Bereich weiter einzuschränken.

Keywords: *smart economics, women empowerment, gender equality, gender digital divide, Argentina*

Introduction

The gender digital divide denotes economic, social and cultural obstacles that prevent or limit women’s access to, use of, and benefit from information and communications technology (ICT). Since the beginning of the 21st century, bridging this gap has been considered an integral element of the women’s empowerment and gender equality discourses in the international development industry.¹ It played a central role in the United Nations Information Communication Technologies Task Force in 2001, or during two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, 2003 and Tunis, 2005). These institutions had been continuing narratives that emerged during the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women (1975–1985) and were further pushed forward by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Since then, gender equality and women’s empowerment were adopted by many multilateral and development institutions and donors, e. g. International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UN, World Bank Group, or United States Agency for International Development. They have even been integrated in the UN Millennium Development Goals (No. 3) and the Sustainable Development Goals (No. 5 and 10).

Nevertheless, these multilateral institutions and donors adopted narratives that mainly stressed aspects of ‘economic well-being’ of gender equality and women’s empowerment. Moreover, the smart economics approach adopted by the World Bank reduced these goals to instrumentalist terms (see next section). In turn, this approach was mirrored in programmes and

1 According to Gosine (2018, p.206), “[t]he ‘development industry’ is an unstable amalgam of many different actors often working in support of, sometimes against, each other’s interests: governments, international agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, non-governmental organizations of feminists [...]”.

actions adopted at the international level to foster development opportunities. Due to the association of economic development with bridging the gender digital divide, the smart economics approach has also been connected to closing this gap. For example, the OECD (2018, p. 14) states:

“The Internet, digital platforms, mobile phones, and digital financial services, offer ‘leapfrog’ opportunities for all and can help bridge the divide by giving women the possibility to earn (additional) income, increase employment opportunities, and access knowledge and general information.”

Developmental feminism emphasised inequalities in post-colonial countries due to the control of economic resources, kinship rules and women’s rights vis-à-vis tradition.

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In such a context where the economic point of view of gender equality and women’s empowerment was the focus of the international development industry, private corporations could easily join the efforts. Furthermore, at the national level, many countries adopted this framework for development. In Argentina’s case, due to the absence of policies to close the gender digital gap, grassroots organisations sponsored by big international and national corporations have been providing training in programming and soft skills, as well as mentorship, leadership, and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, due to the applied smart economics approach and the increasing power that corporations have in the discourse and practice of reducing the gender digital divide, contradictions between closing the gap and women’s empowerment and gender equality narratives have emerged.

This article analyses these tensions and the effects that the smart economics approach has produced in terms of responsibility, accountability, equality and justice. To this end, the article is divided into three sections. The following section introduces a concise recount of the history of women’s empowerment, gender equality, and smart economics. The third section focuses on Argentina and current initiatives to bridge the gender digital divide as well as the risks and problems that the smart economic approach produces. Finally, the paper closes with some considerations on the value of government intervention, integrative approaches, and systemic perspectives.

Gender equality, women’s empowerment and smart economics

Empowerment is a concept that has been advanced in the international development field since the 1970s. According to Batliawala (2007, p. 558), empowerment “was adopted by the lib-

eration theology, popular education, black power, feminist and other movements engaged in struggles for more equitable, participatory, and democratic forms of social change and development”. As such, she argues (pp. 557–8) that the term came to be associated with women through the work of early feminists that articulated a vision of women’s empowerment as a transformative approach concerned with unequal power relations, women’s rights, social, economic, and political conditions and justice. O’Neil et al. (2014, p. 1) define women’s empowerment as “a process of personal and social change through which they gain power, meaningful choices and control over their lives”.

During the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of this idea pictured women as actors in a constant process of questioning the ‘normal’ state of things by reflecting and acting to change situations identified as unjust, by altering power relations and by achieving collective self-confidence as well as a sense of capacity to act (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, p. 405). However, by the end of the 1990s, many development agencies had policies in place to foster women’s empowerment with a reductionist understanding. The emphasis moved from contesting political inequalities and social injustices to promoting economic growth and poverty reduction.

Gender equality has also found its way into the field of international development in the 1970s via the work of feminist scholars. Social scientists working in international development adopted the distinction sex-gender to differentiate between the biological aspect of a person’s identity, ‘sex’, and the malleable side of it, ‘gender’. This distinction provided second wave feminists with the tools to critically assess and press for changing power relations that had previously presented themselves as natural (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, p. 401). Patriarchy, male supremacy and sexism were denounced based on the negative consequences and harm done to women due to discrimination and injustices of a constructed inequality. Developmental feminism, one of the strands of second wave feminism, emphasised the inequalities existent in post-colonial countries due to the control of economic resources, kinship rules and women’s rights vis-à-vis tradition (Lorber 1997, pp. 12–14). However, the opposition to colonialism generated a tension between supporting human rights as Western ideas and condemning oppressive cultural traditions such as female genital mutilation that is difficult to resolve (Lorber 1997, pp. 14–15). Under such conflictive circumstances, the binary sex-gender was rapidly adopted by many international donors within a rhetoric that presented women in a categorical opposition to men and framed their relationship as

a battle for power. Deeper inquiries into the ways that patriarchy affects and oppresses both women and men alike were therefore excluded.

As this narrow heteronormative type of narrative was adopted in the development industry for gender equality and women's empowerment, contingent and embodied configurations of gender as well as gender fluidity were precluded from entering the development arena. Hierarchical and opposing relationships between men and women, between powerful and powerless, concealed other forms of discrimination and injustice. The focus was set on the material conditions, the formal economic, social and political aspects that could be modified without affecting the status quo. As Drucker (2018, p. 22) illustrates, international development agencies and donors were receptive of liberal feminism's demand for equality in the job market, because neoliberal economists pay attention to the public sphere of life and the economy, disregarding the private aspects. Due to their understanding of economic growth based on individual participation in the market economy, women's integration into the market was viewed positively. As Drucker (ibid.) holds, to foster women's integration in the job market, as well as making them more equal to men inside the family, it was assumed that a heterosexual family was the correct private arrangement. Although development practitioners have identified and been working with other family structures as well as lesbian, gay, bi and trans communities, informal participation in the labour economy and different sexualities and gender identities have not yet been sufficiently covered by the development industry.

The connection between women's empowerment, gender equality and the smart economics approach has its roots in the 1980s, when the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) of the World Bank and the IMF inaugurated a period of austerity measures and market reforms (Roberts and Soederberg 2012; Chant and Sweetman 2012). In the 1990s, the evidence gathered to evaluate the impact of the SAPs, the proposals of the Consensus of Washington and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing shed light on women's ability to withstand economic instability and carry on (ibid., p. 519). In this context, the World Bank introduced its report Enhancing Women's Participation in Economic Development (World Bank 1995), which formulated the smart economics approach - women as entrepreneurs. In this document, the World Bank claimed that investing in women is the right thing to do to reduce poverty and foster economic development, including enhancing productivity and efficiency (ibid., p. 22).

Currently, gender equality as part of smart economics is integral to the World Bank's strategy for ending extreme poverty and for sustainable development. As the World Bank Group states in its Gender Strategy (World Bank 2015, p. 7), "promoting gender equality is smart development policy". Although valuable critique abounds regarding the implicit understanding that gender inequalities are outside of markets and therefore, of their scope (Harcourt 2012; Roberts and Soederberg 2012), this perspective has been also increasingly adopted by other international

institutions in connection with the gender digital gap. In addition, private sector interventions in development have also been part of this framing. From public-private partnerships to corporate social responsibility, businesses have seen women's empowerment as a field to be involved in at least since the 1990s. In terms of the gender digital divide, corporations like Microsoft² or Google³ have promoted or sponsored different programmes to improve female participation in the technology labour force.

Working for women's empowerment in ICT in Argentina

In the early 2000s, the specific interest in the gender digital gap emerged. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) presented it as follows:

If, however, the gender dimensions of ICT – in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, employment and potential for empowerment – are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. (UN DAW 2005, p. 3)

Among the gender dimensions of ICT to be addressed, DAW identified gender differences, inequalities and power relations inscribed in ICT that reinforce stereotypes, such as the prejudice that 'technologies are for boys and not for girls'. At the same time, the fact that the industry is mainly male-dominated amplifies inequality between women and men (Pavez 2015). Furthermore, issues such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, occupation, age and the level of education have also been acknowledged as affecting access and use of ICT by women (Hilbert 2011; Bercovich and Scuro 2014).

Latin American governments and civil society organisations have also been part of the debate encompassing gender, ICT and development. One of the 'sites' for producing relevant declarations on gender and development is the periodic Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean. The conference's regional agreements have supported the production and implementation of public policies for ICT development with a gender perspective since the Consensus of Mexico in 2004 and, in particular, with the Consensus of Santo Domingo in 2013 (Pavez 2015, p. 25). Nevertheless, Latin American governments have done little in terms of specific agendas and pol-

2 In 2013, Microsoft awarded a software grant to Pro Mujer to provide access to this company's software to more than 328.000 women in Latin America (Microsoft 2013). In 2018, Microsoft Philanthropies partnered with YouthSpark, Girls Who Code and UN Development Program, among others, to provide training in digital skills (UN w/o y).

3 Google has its own programme, "Women Techmakers", providing digital and soft skills to women since 2012. They organise different types of events (training, leadership, mentorship, and entrepreneurship opportunities), award scholarships, and partner with local organisations to have a global reach (Google w/o y).

icies. In Argentina, in the absence of explicit public policies to bridge the gender divide, a growing number of grassroots initiatives emerged. Non-governmental organisations, women's associations and other types of civil society groups are taking the responsibility to provide training in digital and soft skills, as well as entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities. Some also engage in advocacy. Many of these groups are sponsored by companies such as IBM, Accenture and JP Morgan, or local corporations such as Mercado Libre and Globant.

Even though more than thirteen Argentine initiatives were identified for analysis, the focus of this article is on two cases, Ada IT and Chicas en Tecnología (Girls in Technology), which have been selected because they offer training in programming skills for different target groups, secondary school girls (Chicas en Tecnología) and girls over 18 years of age (Ada IT). I came to know these initiatives in 2015 and have studied them intensively. Sources analysed include these organisations' websites and blogs, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, as well as media coverage (newspapers articles, interviews in media), promotional material and annual reports collected between the end of 2015 and mid-2018. Due to space limitations, only the main outcomes of the study are presented in the following.

These initiative's objective is to increase the number of girls and women in the IT labour force, bridge the gender digital divide, empower women and achieve gender equality in economic terms by providing tailored training camps to a limited number of participants. For example, Chicas en Tecnología quotes the Digital Agenda for Europe to explain one of the reasons for providing training in digital skills: “[I]n 2020 there will be 1,6 M job vacancies related to technology but only 25% of them will

programmes are considered viable options to acquire programming skills and entrepreneurship opportunities. The risk here is to further exacerbate the gap between those women that have access to their programmes and those who are left out. In Ada IT's case, there is a competitive process to obtain one of the few places offered in their courses. Chicas en Tecnología, for its part, expects that either teenage girls from the city of Buenos Aires or principals from secondary schools across the country apply to its programmes. While provincial and local governments have signed agreements with Chicas en Tecnología to adopt their programmes in a limited number of schools, responsibility for the development of these courses continues to lie in the group's hand.

While local or federal governments are accountable to their constituencies, dependency on corporations generates organisations that are accountable to their sponsors and not to the larger community they target. Bridging the gender digital gap is presented according to the interest of their sponsors - national and global corporations - looking at increasing their productivity, efficiency, and profits, while reducing their expenses due to the lower salaries paid in developing countries. In order to preserve their resources, both Chicas en Tecnología and Ada IT have to tailor their training programmes, events and mentoring and leadership opportunities to the interest of their supporters. Then again, better labour conditions for female employees and an increasingly diverse labour force are not actually producing any significant change in the status quo. To be accountable to their sponsors precludes any discussion about unequal power relations, heteronormativity, or patriarchy, thus favouring a narrow focus on entrepreneurial women and economic growth.

*Once the focus of development policy is solely
on the economic perspective, this erases any connection
to governments' responsibilities.*

be filled” (Chicas en Tecnología 2018, author's translation). Ada IT stresses that women's participation in the IT labour force is a strong element to foster economic growth: “Betting on women's economic empowerment is an efficient and safe way to ensure sustainable growth rates in developing countries” (Ada IT 2017, author's translation). In both initiatives' programmes the focus is on economic empowerment of women, although they also foster a sense of belonging and group identity among the female IT community.

Once the focus is solely on the economic perspective, however, the instrumental use of the concepts erases any connection to government's responsibility. As such, it is assumed that bridging the gender digital gap can be exclusively resolved by the market and a few civil society organisations. Because government policies are not specifically targeting women, these initiatives'

Not only economic, but also social, and geographical barriers combine in adversity against these initiatives' good intentions. Absence of specific policies for closing the gender digital divide also entails an unequal treatment and potential discrimination of those not reached by these initiatives' activities. With their scarce resources and focus on girls and young women both initiatives have limited social and geographic impact. They operate mainly in Buenos Aires, where they are located, thus discriminating unintentionally against girls and women elsewhere in the country. Moreover, in both cases, although they have presence in the main national media, knowledge about and admission to their training and mentoring opportunities requires access to a computer, Internet, and social media. In addition, the unserved population includes men and gender non-conforming people. As previously explained, the development industry's narrative

adopted a heteronormative perspective that leaves out non-binary people. For example Chicas en Tecnología's programme for a better world (Programando un Mundo Mejor) states that participation is restricted to "being a female secondary school student and applying together with a team made up of 3 girls from the same school" (Chicas en Tecnología 2018, author's translation). Ada IT explains that attendance to classes at its Coding Bootcamp of Frontend Web Development "is in a safe and reliable environment, only for women" (Ada IT 2018, author's translation). By means of constant references to women, Chicas en Tecnología's and Ada IT's rhetoric reinforces the understanding that there are only two genders, and the target of their actions is exclusively women.

*Civil society initiatives for promoting women's
IT competences have to tailor their training programmes
to the interest of their financial supporters.*

Likewise, due to the focalisation of their efforts, these initiatives generate unjust outcomes. For example, a tension between sisterhood and individuality exists in these initiatives' discourses. The smart economics approach with its emphasis on women as individual entrepreneurs promotes the individualistic principle of 'every woman for herself', thus opposing the sense of community that these initiatives also seek to promote. As Ada IT's founder stated in an interview, "[a]ll [applicants] go through a selection process that includes a sequential logical skills test and an interview. In the last edition we had 400 applicants and 50 were selected" (La Nación 2018, author's translation). Although the objective of both organisations is to promote the sense of belonging to the women's IT community, such a competitive process only widens the division between successful and unfortunate applicants. Furthermore, girls and women with neither economic means, nor technological skills or educational level have fewer opportunities to access their programmes and integrate the IT labour force. This, in turn, contributes to broadening the gender digital divide and reinforces current unjust structures.

Conclusion

The smart economics approach has negatively affected the development industry's understanding of development, and more importantly, of women's empowerment and gender equality. The emphasis on productivity, efficiency, and expansion of the labour force has narrowed the meaning and value of these concepts. The strategic seizing of these ideas has produced a scenario in which the importance of critically assessing current conditions in order to identify all kinds of violent, abusive, op-

pressive, and discriminatory practices is dismissed. Women's empowerment has been reduced to participation in the formal economy and to growing purchasing power, while gender equality has been adapted to a binary in which women - and only women - should achieve equal economic status to men.

Absence of reference to systemic inequalities or social, political, and economic unjust conditions in the international development discourse has made this frame a valuable tool for corporations to push forward their interests and agendas. It is in this context that big corporations' interventions in development and specifically in bridging the gender digital divide can be understood. Moreover, chronic economic instability in developing countries has meant that they have had to adopt these narratives

to obtain loans from international financial institutions and attract private investments. At the same time, this discourse has produced an understanding of the gender digital divide as being only about participation in the technology labour force and better salaries.

In Argentina, the lack of policies to bridge the gender digital gap has paved the way for grassroots initiatives with big corporations' support offering training in digital and soft skills, mentorship, leadership and entrepreneurship opportunities. Nevertheless, in order to be sponsored, many of these initiatives have had to accept a compromise: efforts to bridge the gender digital divide must be linked to the smart economics concept's narrow understanding of women's empowerment and gender equality.

*Women's empowerment through IT
competences has been reduced to
participation in the formal economy.*

Thus, I have argued in this article that the instrumentalist use of women's empowerment and gender equality has generated a series of contradictions inherent to corporations' increasing power in the discourse and practice of reducing the gender digital gap. The emphasis has been on four aspects: responsibility, accountability, equality, and justice. Without denying the efforts, importance, and value of initiatives like Chicas en Tecnología and Ada IT, only a shift in the framing towards a more inclusive and systemic understanding of women's empowerment and gender equality can lead to an actual reduction of the gen-

der digital gap. The government should take action, accept its responsibility, and implement policies specifically designed to tackle the divide. In addition, stakeholders must contribute to the design and implementation in order to integrate all their perspectives and values. Understanding that development, empowerment, and equality are processes, and as such never complete, is fundamental to succeeding in bridging the gender digital divide.

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