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THE RIGHT TO DISCONNECT
WOMEN LEFT BEHIND BY THE DIGITAL AGE

The fourth industrial revolution, currently under way, promises upheavals as significant as those brought about by the invention of the printing press. The lifestyle, ways of working and professions we know today will change radically. Will those unversed in IT become the new illiterates? The answer seems obvious. Yet the position occupied by women in this digital world is peripheral to say the least. Huge challenges still lie ahead if we are to reach the equality essential for the harmonious and sustainable development of our societies.

Digitalisation[1] can be defined as the use of artificial intelligence technologies (including big data, cloud computing and robotics) to change the way we work.

Its impact is felt in various areas:

1. Job creation: new sectors, new products and new services.
2. Work itself: new professions and new forms of interaction between workers and machines.
3. Job displacement: disappearance of certain jobs involving repetitive work, such as secretarial and office jobs, retail jobs and low-skilled roles in the postal sector, courier services, cleaning and catering services, etc.
Workers will be able to choose their place of work, allowing a better work-life balance and more flexible working hours.
However, this mobility also implies an additional workload created by the need to constantly send job applications and attend interviews, and to invest in lifelong learning.
4. Exchanges: platforms for exchange between developed and developing countries.

According to certain alarming studies[2], 47 % of jobs will be affected, which could mean the disappearance of 5.1 million jobs in the above-mentioned sectors, set against the creation of two million new jobs in IT, mathematics, architecture and engineering.

Moreover, there is increasing use of new technology across all sectors and all types of post. Rather than basic knowledge, more and more often complex problem solving, teamwork and interpersonal negotiation skills are required[3].

The fourth industrial revolution is set to reshape the global economy and society as a whole, and widen the gap between men and women, since it is mostly posts occupied by women which will become obsolete (administrative and assistant roles, agricultural work in developing countries). There are political, economic and socio-cultural reasons for this.
In Europe, the percentage of women working in technology is not increasing, and in engineering the figure stands at barely 7 %. It is feared that by 2020 women will make up only 1 % of the technology workforce[4].

In terms of equality, differences can be seen in the position of women as users of technology, compared to that of men.

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[1]   https://www.uniglobalunion.org/sites/default/files/files/news/digitalization_-_en.pdf
[2]   Idem
[3]   https://www.sciencespo.fr/executive-education/lere-digitale
[4]   https://www.uniglobalunion.org/news/where-are-all-women-innovateher-forging-a-future-girls-tech

Worldwide, women have less access to the internet than men, and many women do not have a mobile phone, whether due to the amount of time to access such technology permitted by their family or to cultural reasons.

Regarding flexibility, studies show that men take advantage of it to put more effort into their careers, whereas women tend to use it to engage in activities outside of work. Due to family responsibilities, women have less time to spend on training. Older working women see their chances of remaining in work diminish as it becomes more difficult for them to keep up with developments in technology.

In 2014 a UN report on gender equality and sustainable development[5] indicated that macroeconomic policies are not as neutral as we would like to believe. The report highlighted various imbalances and structural inequalities.

For gender-related reasons, men and women do not use the internet in the same way, or for the same purposes. Women are more active online consumers and communicators, rather than creative users. Various solutions have been proposed, such as developing appropriate strategies and policies, ensuring access to communication technologies, fighting the online risks which hinder women's access, encouraging the development of material, applications and services which meet women's needs, promoting the presence of women in the technology sector, including in senior roles, and developing synergies between the parties involved.

Why do we need to have women working in technology? If it needs explaining...

Apart from the fact that half of technology users are women, their choices are also crucial in purchasing decisions[6]. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reported in 2013 that the online presence of women could increase the GDP of developing countries by USD 18 billion[7]. However, the benefits would go beyond economics. We must not underestimate the role of women in healthcare and education, nor forget the impact that an online network of women could create in terms of influence and awareness-raising regarding gender equality.

In the future, qualities such as creativity, problem solving and social skills will be essential. The arts, the media, management and healthcare are fields in which human workers maintain their advantage over machines and in which women can excel. Technology also plays a political role, through women's contribution to participatory democracy via electronic voting, online discussions, etc.

Are we making any progress?

The European Union has launched initiatives aimed at promoting women's access to communication technologies[8].

The social investment package (period to 2020)[9] encourages Member States to stimulate women's participation in work through the use of online technology to enable flexibility, as well as the promotion of childcare and better basic training. These same objectives remain valid today.

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[5] http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2014/world-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2014-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3045

[6] http://www.think-progress.com/fr/tendances-technologiques/un-grand-pas-pour-la-femme-numerique/

[7] https://www.w4.org/fr/nouvelles-technologies-pour-emancipation-des-femmes/
Figures confirmed in 2018. See
https://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/public/us/en/documents/pdf/women-and-the-web.pdf

[8] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU(2018)604940_EN.pdf
See the recent (2018) European Parliament motion:
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+B8-2018-0183+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN

[9] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1044#navItem-5

From a feminist viewpoint, technology is perceived as a cultural issue: representation within the technological world is not 'given', it is created, and so improving access is not enough! This knowledge must be created by getting women involved in definitions which make sense to them, and an appropriate technology culture must be developed, including through feminist policies. Content which satisfies women's needs and interests, and appropriate technological literature, could contribute to this[10]. Those are the demands of feminist cyberactivists. Many women avoid this sector due to under-representation caused by a lack of female role models[11].

Regarding concerns about online security, which cause many women to self-censor, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)[12] has looked into the policies of the three main platforms - Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - on violence against women. There was a reticence to address this problem until it was recently brought into the public eye. There was no procedure for redress. These platforms have taken steps on reporting, but have nevertheless demonstrated their inability to protect women from violence online, whilst protecting freedom of speech effectively[13]. There is still a lot of progress to be made.

The fourth industrial revolution cannot be realised without improved participation of women in the financial sector, achieved through online platforms providing training programmes and mentoring for newcomers from more experienced people. To encourage diversity, there must be initiatives to fight against stereotypes, get women interested in studying IT subjects and encourage innovation and entrepreneurship[14]. Far too many female entrepreneurs have difficulties in finding the necessary guarantees to obtain capital to start and develop their businesses[15]. High-quality digital platforms bringing female entrepreneurs and female investors together are essential to the development of a sector in which they are sadly lacking today[16].

Recommended websites:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3htJR0mehPY
At the UNI World Congress in Liverpool in June 2018, two female technology crusaders called for more initiatives to get women and girls involved in technology.
https://www.uniglobalunion.org/news/where-are-all-women-innovateher-forging-a-future-girls-tech

To hear more about technological developments and the jobs of the future, watch the European Parliament DIGITEC 2018 event which took place on 20 November.
http://squarestream.tv/gold/iframe.html

Palmina Di Meo
US PE representative on the USF Federal Committee

See also analysis by C Rosenblatt: http://base.socioeco.org/docs/wpesseurope-2.pdf

10   https://www.apc.org/en/project/feminist-tech-exchange
https://usbeketrica.com/article/coding-rights-collectif-technologie-feministe-joana-varon
https://www.centre-hubertine-auclert.fr/article/femmes-et-numerique-cyberactivisme-et-feminisme-2-jours-pour-comprendre-les-enjeux-en-france

11   https://lesclesdedemain.lemonde.fr/point-de-vue-influenceur/-les-filles-le-numerique-c-est-aussi-pour-vous-_a-94-5553.html

12   https://www.apc.org/

13   https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/press-brief-what-are-facebook-twitter-youtube-doin

14   https://www.blogdumoderateur.com/parite-metiers-numerique/

15   On the difficulties in accessing finance, see https://lesclesdedemain.lemonde.fr/point-de-vue-influenceur/-les-filles-le-numerique-c-est-aussi-pour-vous-_a-94-5553.html

16   http://www.economics-ejournal.org/economics/discussionpapers/2018-18/file
https://www.oecd.org/social/empowering-women-in-the-digital-age-brochure.pdf

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