



Is Automation a Feminist Opportunity at the G20?

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Executive Summary

With the fourth Industrial Revolution, work is predicted to drastically change. As the forum for global economic discussions, it is vital that the G20 discusses the future of work and the challenges it presents. This brief proposes that the G20 could benefit from Marxist Feminists critiques of work, and the alternatives they pose. The proposed review of compliance with the goal to reduce labour participation inequality by 25% by 2025 (hence the title '25 by 25') shows that liberal feminism is present on the agenda for the Japanese presidency. But if the G20 is to consider other strands of Feminism, there remains a long way to go.

Feminism and the Future of Work

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo made it clear from the outset that the fourth industrial revolution will be a key theme of 2019 G20 in Osaka. His [pre-summit message](#) refers to '[Society 5.0](#)' – the next wave of technological development following the Information Age – encompassing artificial

intelligence, further automation and digitisation of jobs.

Abe presents Society 5.0 as an opportunity to drastically [improve living standards](#) by allowing for more leisure time and better access to health care. By contrast, [last year's G20](#) in Argentina highlighted how international labour markets may, in fact, be disrupted by job losses from this same process.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs, one thing is certain: work as we know it is changing. Yet, the phenomenon of rapid change to the nature of work is nothing new.

While politicians are only recently questioning the nature of work, feminists have been calling for a fundamental change to work for centuries. In her book, [The Problem With Work](#), Marxist Feminist Kathi Weeks critiques the very notion of work by arguing that its foundations are fundamentally masculine, and so is set up in a way that caters for men, while alienating women from the workplace.

A key issue in this debate is that full-time work is much more secure in comparison to part-time work. The former is typically more secure and better paid than the latter. Equally, part-time versus full-time is often a gendered division. In the [UK](#), 42% of employed women are part-time compared to 13% of men. Furthermore, women hold a [double burden](#) as they are expected to do unpaid labour in the home as well, such as house work.

So, what can the G20 learn from feminism? And how can feminism inform those eager to embrace the fourth industrial revolution? With increased automation, countries such as the [Netherlands](#) are looking for ways to change how we work, with a move towards part-time work as potentially the primary source of employment, this has been largely influenced by Marxist Feminist critiques of work. The G20 should follow in the footsteps of the Netherlands and take seriously these propositions from radical feminism. If the G20 does this, resulting implications could increase free time while maintaining income, and meaningfully address gender inequalities at the same time.

Abe's [message](#) also raises three central issues beyond industrialisation; social inequality, protection of future

generations and - critically for [Japan](#) - the ageing population.

These three categories are women's issues as much as anything else. Traditionally women stayed at home and cared for the family, resolving many concerns frequently raised at the G20. Would we be so concerned about the issues of an ageing population if the work force suddenly had 50% more time to care for elderly relatives?

Loss of jobs to automation is not the only threat to work. [Wage stagnation](#) is one of the most pressing issues in the job market, and experts have challenged the proposition that [skill acquisition](#) will solve our job crisis. Work as it is, is not working. Instead of maintaining the status quo and treating the symptoms, it is paramount that we reconsider our fundamental assumptions about work and the purposes of it. We need to look to solutions like those suggested by Weeks: Universal Basic income, four-day weeks, and a secure and respected move to part-time work.

Feminist critiques of work can – and should – be used to hold a mirror up to the future of work in so-called Society 5.0 at the G20. And, when thinking about the opportunities afforded by the fourth industrial revolution, don't forget that the biggest change to work in thousands of years has already happened: women work.

History between Feminism and the G20

Generally, Liberal Feminism has been accepted into the G20, at least in name. However, for Marxist Feminists, there are fundamental disagreements with the ideology of the G20. As it is currently constituted, the body reproduces neoliberal values, such as prioritising market-driven growth. In contrast, Marxist Feminists prioritise the liberation of oppressed people, and sustainable development for these purposes. Due to this, Feminists, especially those from the Global South, have established their own institutions, such as the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). The G20 has never considered solutions from Marxism, but it is time that they do.

The G20's interactions with Liberal Feminism suggest that it will be an uphill battle to get the G20 to consider anything more radical. The G20 has been resistant to implement suggestions from the W20. The Argentina W20 recommended that domestic care work should be included in calculations of [GDP](#) in order to visualise the contribution unpaid work makes to the economy. Additionally, the Japan W20 recommended that governments amend labour laws to support [flexible work](#). Both recommendations received minimal attention from the G20 at large.

The future of work received an ample amount of attention at 2018 G20. In the [Leaders' Declaration](#), Mauricio Macri spoke of the future of work, however all the recommended actions were to increase workers' skills and employability, not to seriously question the purpose of work as Marxist Feminism argues it should.

Osaka G20

Aspects of the fourth Industrial Revolution were mentioned in all eight [main themes](#), which indicated that this would be a central topic at the 2019 G20. However, it was ultimately dominated by the China-US trade deal talks. Interestingly, women's issues were highlighted in six of eight themes, which provided some hope that women's issues would be taken seriously. But ultimately, nothing of great importance to women's issues was decided. The most radical agreement to come from this G20 for women is that the implementation of the 2015 25 by 25 commitment will be reviewed at the leadership level.

25 by 25 is an initiative by the W20 (Women's 20), which sets out a series of concrete policy recommendations G20 countries should implement in order to reduce the gender gap in labour participation by [25% by 2025](#). It was taken on as a commitment by the G20 in 2015. However, at C20 (Civil Society 20) Women's briefing, it was clear that there were many tensions between the W20/C20 and the G20. In

the first day of the summit, Miwa Atsuko from the C20 stated that the G20 needed to be doing much more in order for the W20 and C20 to be satisfied that the G20 would seriously tackle women's issues. Furthermore, while the W20 were pleased that the 25 by 25 goal was taken on by the G20, the W20 expressed that many G20 countries were yet to implement any of the recommendations of the 25 by 25 initiative. In addition, the W20 explicitly stated at their press briefing that it was only intended to be the start of women's empowerment, not the end. Yet there is limited serious adoption of the start of moderate reform, let alone the whole moderate reform.

Despite the W20's economic and growth focused analysis, the B20 (Business 20) declined to sign either engagement groups joint statements. Both statements focused on discrimination in the workplace, especially for women. However, despite pressure from the C20 and W20, the B20 declined to sign. The latter has a history of separating itself from the other engagement groups, as last year it also only signed one of the two joint statements, with no official reason given. But one thing is clear, there are tensions within the G20 in general, and the engagement groups at the Osaka Summit specifically.

As anticipated, women's empowerment was part of the final [Leaders' Declaration](#). More surprising is the acknowledgement that the G20

needs to do more to accelerate progress towards gender equality goals. While there is no concrete explanation of what should be done to 'accelerate progress', the statement does indicate the areas that need to be worked towards. These are: women's unpaid domestic work, putting an end to employment discrimination, and recognising the potential of women. Marxist Feminists' reform of work, such as a four-day week, could fit well with solving these issues. With less time in work, at potentially no cost to efficiency due to increased automation, all genders would have more time to equally contribute to domestic work.

In addition, much employer discrimination is structural. For example, as women tend to be the primary caregiver for children, they are less likely to be able to work later and so may miss out on extra pay. However, if working later was eradicated through a mass move to part-time work, this issue would be much less pervasive. Overall, Marxist Feminist alternatives to work are in line with many goals of the G20, and so there is good reason for the G20 to take these alternatives seriously.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Work is changing, but will work work? And who will work work for? What do we mean by making work work? These once very philosophical questions are now being forced on the agenda as

work faces an identity crisis. If not now, when will we ever challenge our preconceptions about work? Next year the G20 should consider Marxist Feminist alternatives to the neoliberal conceptions of work, in order to address the challenges we face from the fourth Industrial Revolution.

As anticipated, despite promising signs from the Osaka and Argentina W20s, women's issues received very little attention. While the Future of Work received more attention, the discussions on this perpetuated neoliberal ideology and alternatives were not considered. In the current

situation, it seems unlikely that Marxist Feminist ideas will be discussed at the G20 in the near future, as Liberal Feminist ideas are still struggling to be meaningfully implemented. However, if Marxist Feminists continue to campaign, and especially if G20 countries elect left-wing politicians, we may see some real consideration of Marxist Feminism at the G20, and this will be beneficial to the discussion on the future of work.

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