Automation, Automation, Automation: preparing women for the future of work

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Executive Summary

Both the future of work and gender equality have pride of place on the 2018 G20 summit agenda, giving the group a prime opportunity to address these previously neglected issues. As automation puts an ever-growing number of jobs at risk, members must work to create more educational opportunities so that women are able to 'upskill' or 're-skill' in order to participate in a labour market dominated by technology. Women are consistently underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), from their childhood experiences in education systems, through to their representation in high-flying leadership positions. The 2018 Buenos Aires Summit made a multitude of commitments that promote strategies to achieve gender equality in the labour market, but the ambiguous, immeasurable nature of these commitments calls into question just how successful the G20 will be.

Stitched Up: Job Losses for Women in the Age of Automation

According to the World Economic Forum, 57 per cent of the jobs predicted to be disrupted by automation in the next eight years belong to women. Persisting gender roles and low education levels mean that women are often employed in low-skilled work, which puts their jobs at a higher risk of automation. The Textiles, Clothing and Footwear (TCF) industry is a prime example of this, where the development of 'sewbots' is set to overhaul the current production process by eliminating much of the workforce. In the aftermath of automation, labour demand will shift towards highly skilled design and engineering jobs, leaving millions of low-skilled women unemployed and unable to reenter the labour market.

The unstable future of work is compounded by the fact that too few women are pursuing careers in STEM, the precise careers that offer an alternative to unemployment. Research has found that "the mismatch between masculine STEM stereotypes and feminine gender role

expectations" is responsible for limiting female participation in STEM at all stages of life. Evidence-based policy proposals could increase the number of women in further education STEM courses, thus reducing the gender imbalance and securing women's work prospects post-automisation. Without education, particularly in STEM subjects, automation will make mass female unemployment an unavoidable reality.

The participation focus of previous G20 summits

When this intersection between gender equality and the labour market has been explored, commitments have been overwhelmingly about increasing female participation in the labour market rather than the conditions of their employment. Participation is certainly fundamental in bringing about gender equality; however, the G20 must also consider the types of work that women are participating in and the pay, working conditions and skill-level of that employment. The details of how women are participating in the labour market have major implications for the future of their employment, and this understanding has been missing at the G20 summits thus far.

This focus on participation is reflected in previous G20 communiques, dominating commitments to gender equality in the labour market. The 2009 London Summit produced the first G20 attempt to address the intersection between gender and work, with the commitment to improve participation by making the labour market more 'family-friendly'. At the 2012 Los Cabos Summit, the G20 took a step further by committing to "take concrete actions to overcome the barriers hindering women's full economic and social participation". While gender equality appeared to be climbing higher on the G20's agenda, no measurable commitments were made - despite the promise of 'concrete actions' - and the unbinding nature of G20 commitments makes it difficult to ensure that meaningful progress will take place.

The 2014 Brisbane Summit was a cause for optimism in terms of gender equality as the G20 upgraded their previous ambiguous commitments and members agreed to the goal of "reducing the gap in participation rates between men and women in our countries by 25 per cent by 2025". If successful, the G20 states that this goal will bring more than 100 million women into the labour force, but the quality, skill-level, and security of these jobs is not elaborated upon. The G20's ongoing participation focus was reductive, as women can be participating in the labour market but simultaneously be trapped in low-skilled, low-paid jobs due to insufficient education.

At last year's summit in Hamburg, the G20 began to acknowledge the need to address the underlying issues behind low female participation in the labour market, by committing to improve the quality of education and training, as well as supporting social protection policies. The German presidency also saw the launch of the #eSkills4Girls initiative, which focuses specifically on ensuring that girls are given educational opportunities to develop the specific digital skills that will be in-demand in the future.

Previous G20 summits have started to consider how to best prepare for changes in the labour market, but this work lacked a gendered perspective. In the context of the financial crisis, the 2009 summit concluded that the G20 must ensure that people can access lifelong skills training to prepare for changes in the market. Prior to Argentina's presidency, preparing for the future of work appears to have fallen off the radar.

Argentina 2018: a fresh approach (or not)?

As Argentina's presidency of the G20 made the future of work a main priority, and promised to take a gendered perspective on the whole agenda, preparing women for future employment challenges has been one of the main pillars of the summit. The 2018 communiqué has been a disappointment for many, exemplified by the US insistence that it will not be a part of the Paris Agreement to tackle climate change. Even so, the bright side of the communiqué is apparent in the G20's multiple and varied commitments about education and work; if fulfilled, these commitments could markedly improve women's prospects in the future labour market.

The G20 stated that they will promote core competencies, which is vital from a gendered perspective, as women account for almost two-thirds of the 750 million adults who are illiterate. Digital skills are also now a core competency, and members have committed to promote measures that reduce the digital gender divide, although no specific measures are identified.

Aside from promoting digital skills, female participation in STEM has long been a priority for international organisations such as the ILO and OECD, and it is positive that the G20 have acknowledged that evidence-based teaching methods should be rolled out in all stages of the education system in order to increase girls' uptake of STEM subjects and careers.

The G20 members committed to promoting vocational training and the re-skilling of workers, which is fundamental in mitigating the unemployment risk that

millions of low-skilled women would otherwise face. However, taking a life-cycle approach and retraining those already participating in the labour market requires stable and [significant funding](#) from governments, which is not guaranteed in the communiqué.

A crucial missing component in this year's communiqué is the need for gender disaggregated data. There are significant gaps in knowledge at the moment due to the lack of this data, and we therefore have a limited understanding of statistics about gender inequality in unpaid care, leadership diversity, and digital skills. Access to this data would allow the G20 to make more measurable commitments to reduce gender inequality in the labour market.

It is certainly encouraging to see that the issue of how we prepare women for the future of work has been thoroughly discussed and addressed in the communiqué. Having said that, the number of commitments that 'promote' various strategies, without substantiating how strategies will be promoted, or how success will be measured, harks a return to the G20's ambiguous gender equality commitments of the past. The 2018 communiqué reflects the problematic nature of the G20 - that while its discussions could be a meaningful vehicle for change, unbinding and unspecific commitments could prove to be empty words.

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