



The Future of Work in the New Normal
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A comment on vulnerability, insecurity, and the future of work

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Clearly the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the adoption of new technologies in society. The disruption of daily life caused by suppression strategies and social distancing has changed forever how hundreds of millions of people work, study, entertain, communicate, and eat.

The pandemic also accelerated the adoption of new technologies in workplaces. In food processing and beverage factories, for example, automation was fast-tracked to overcome disruptions in logistics; reduce the number of workers onsite; multiply the tasks of workers reporting to work; and increase the scope and reach of remote management. The objective – industry claims – is safer work and greater output: less people, more product, and more effective delivery to feed populations in lockdown. But this also translates into fewer jobs, wider profit margins and greater insecurity at the height of a global crisis.

Most discussion on technological transformation and the future of work assumes that this technological change will drive social transformation. However, the experience of workers before and during this pandemic suggests a deepening social crisis. In food and beverage manufacturing, food services and food delivery, as well as the hotel, restaurant, catering and tourism sector, new technologies and automation are layered on top of *existing* vulnerability, insecurity, and undervalued work.

To understand this, it is important to understand vulnerability and the value of work.

Today is World Food Day and – according to the United Nations report on food security and COVID-19 released in July – [we face the greatest global food crisis in 50 years](#).

This food crisis already exists for 820 million people living in acute food insecurity. Among those living in hunger are those that grow and produce the food that feeds the world. Women constitute a vast majority of food producers in agriculture. In most countries, agriculture also depends heavily on migrant workers.

The work of planting, harvesting, producing, delivering, and serving food is among the lowest value of any work in the world. It is essential work but is not attributed a social or economic value that matches the contribution these workers make to society. Their work of course has tremendous intrinsic value, but it is not recognized, respected, and rewarded accordingly. For a vast number of women whose labour is exploited as unpaid family labour, bonded labour, forced and trafficked labour, the value of their work is virtually nothing.

There is a causal relationship between vulnerability and the value of work. The greater the vulnerability of women and migrant workers due to discrimination and marginalization (expressions of systemic patriarchy and racism), the less their work is valued. Housekeeping in hotels – the cleaning of hotel rooms at the height of a global pandemic when health and hygiene is so vital – remains low-paid work with excessive workloads and working hours. Because it is work predominantly done by women and migrant workers. The entire language of skills is used to justify this because it is defined as low-skilled or unskilled work.

When we discuss the transformation that shapes the future of work, we need to consider why certain kinds of essential work is attributed no value.

Similarly, any discussion of skilling, re-skilling and training must necessarily address the issue of the value of work. All of the training, skilling and re-skilling programs launched in response to the COVID-19 crisis will be of no consequence if there is no means of ensuring recognition of the value of work and translating that into decent wages. Yet all this training occurs in the context of mass unemployment and insecurity, which means employers do not need to pay wages commensurate with these skills. They will justify this in terms of competitive markets, flexibility, etc. But it is simply exploiting the desperation and fear that mass unemployment and insecurity brings. Companies can and will pay less.

The food processing and dairy companies fast-tracking automation and new technologies explain a shift from technical skills to “soft skills”. Soft skills are not software and computer skills related to STEM education. Quite the opposite - it requires little or no understanding of the work being done. “Soft skills” are simply a willingness to follow detailed instructions all day via smartphones and tablets under the instruction of remote technicians and specialists. Soft skills are essentially behaviour and attitude. And as we know from workers’ facing vulnerability and insecurity in precarious jobs, fear of being penalized or terminated underpins the required attitude, i.e., soft skills.

If we stay on the current path, then upskilling, re-skilling and cross-skilling in this technological transformation will create secure jobs for about 5% of production workers supported by another 10-15% in self-employed, part-time, work from home, on-call, standby positions. In the future of work the latter group of workers will be considered highly skilled but will remain precarious.

What ultimately defines the future of work is the combination of the current informal economy and precarious employment arrangements (based on decades of casualization and outsourcing) with new technologies. Automation, digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotization are layered on top of existing precarious and informal employment arrangements. By default this incorporates the power relations that exploit this vulnerability and insecurity. It is not about better, more secure, safer jobs for a technologically enhanced future. It is about increasing informalization and casualization and extracting more from those who live and work in insecure jobs and livelihoods.

The United Workers Union [UWU] in Australia published a report in August called [Technology and Power: understanding issues of insecure work and technological change in Australian workplaces](#). This report shows that the most significant technological transformation of the workplace is greater surveillance of workers and more effective means of managing or controlling workers in insecure work (casual, contractual and outsourced workers).

This is apparent everywhere. In our discussions with women workers in the food and beverage industry who are leaders and members of the Pakistan Food Workers Federation [PFWF], they spoke of increased workloads, pressure, and stress as a result of new technologies. The most significant change, however, is the tracking and identification of individual workers' responsibility in production and logistics [warehousing]. Workers are using new digital platforms on devices or smartphones to input data while being tracked. Delays, errors, loss and breakage, are all tracked to each worker, attributing individual responsibility. This results in warnings, penalties and possibly termination.

Layered on top of systemic patriarchy, this means women face far greater stress and pressure and are exposed to harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

Layered on top of systemic racism, this means greater harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

Layered on top of precarious employment [insecure jobs], this means heightened vulnerability and the risk of non-renewal of employment contracts or termination.

Fear of this happening creates the “soft skills” that companies are looking for in the future of work.

In the absence of the right to freedom of association – the right to form and join unions – this fear itself will become the landscape of the future of work.

Only because they have access to the right to join a union are the women leaders and members of PFWF preparing a charter of demands on “technological rights” based on the “Ethical framework for workplace technology” presented in the UWU report. They will tackle the abuse of new technologies, surveillance and stress as well gender discrimination and harassment.

Women union leaders and members are taking similar action in other countries in Asia. This is part of the IUF Asia/Pacific *Women, Unions & Power* initiative in the region.

We must use our collective bargaining power in workplaces and across industries to rebalance power and negotiate the potential changes that new technologies bring. This involves defending rights and job security; rejecting surveillance technologies and the invasion of privacy; pushing back against individual responsibility [blame]; and reducing vulnerability and insecurity by eliminating gender discrimination, racial discrimination, and precarious employment.

This is the only way in which the future of work can be a future of secure, safe and meaningful work. It also enables the realization of the universal human right to work. As Article 23.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms:

Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

As the General Comment No.18 on "the right to work" adopted by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on November 24, 2005, explains:

The right to work is essential for realizing other human rights and forms an inseparable and inherent part of human dignity.

Article 23.4 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights also reaffirms that: *Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his/her interests.*

The right to freedom of association is vital to realizing the right to work in secure, safe conditions with decent wages. It is vital to eliminating vulnerability and insecurity. Therefore, this right also forms an inseparable and inherent part of human dignity.

Ensuring that all workers are recognized as workers and that they can access their right to form and join trade unions will ultimately determine whether the future of work is a future with dignity, or not.