

Through the 'information society' prism: Scoping gender equality for the post-2015 agenda

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Summary

The emergent information or network society¹ context offers a range of opportunities for women and girls to enhance their participation across economic, socio-cultural and public-political realms of life, as well as the scope for enhancing their individual freedoms. The Post-2015 agenda therefore, both in terms of goals and related targets and indicators, has to promote and measure women's participation in the information society and their access to and effective use of the Internet and ICTs. This paper recommends that the question of gender and ICTs must be addressed in the post-2015 global development agenda, in the following manner:

1. There should be a specific goal related to the meaningful and effective use of ICTs and the Internet, that is measured through gender sensitive targets and indicators. This should take into account the quality of access, and not just availability.
2. There should be a specific goal related to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment that takes into account access to and effective use of ICTs and the Internet as a target (with appropriate indicators) within the goal. The larger goal of women's empowerment in the contemporary information society cannot be dis-embedded from the context that ICTs are creating.
3. To facilitate a nuanced assessment, the indicators that are evolved under the above-mentioned goals must capture the individual-household, public-institutional and community-social aspects of access to, and use of, ICTs and the Internet.

The paper also highlights the areas that global and national policy and programmatic frameworks need to address, in order to promote the gender equality agenda in the information society context: (a) Promotion of access and effective use of the Internet and ICTs (b) Creation of opportunity structures for women and (c) Building equitable techno-architectures.

Key words: MDGs, gender and ICTs, post-2015 agenda, information society, network society, gender equality

Enclosures: Annex 1 'Gender Equality and ICTs: Existing Global Frameworks'

1 'Information society' is a term that has been coined to refer to the current context where the use, distribution, consumption and manipulation of information is increasingly at the heart of our social, economic and cultural life. The rise of the knowledge economy as opposed to a Fordist, industrial economy and the increasing reduction of space and time barriers to information and communication flows with the growth of digital technologies, the rise and increasing significance of networks in all spheres of life, are some of its most visible characteristics. The term 'network society' was coined by Manuel Castells to describe this context, as an attempt to draw attention to the centrality and significance of networks.

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Introduction

The opportunities offered by the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for promoting women's empowerment and gender equality, have been long acknowledged. In 1995, at the cusp of the digital revolution, the Beijing Platform for Action identified the need to "increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication"ⁱ. Since then, it has become increasingly clear that the new ICTs offer unprecedented possibilities for transforming all aspects of life. Especially for women, the emerging information (or network) society has heralded a threshold effect, with new possibilities for collectivising, organising and resistance.

This transformational power of ICTs that enables women to fully participate in all spheres of life, has been acknowledged in the Geneva Declaration of Principles of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 :

"We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the information society. We are committed to ensuring that the information society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes"ⁱⁱ.

From Beijing to WSIS, there was more than just a semantic shift in the terms of the debate; it was actually a movement towards acknowledging the paradigm of the information society and the social churn heralded by new technologies. The Information Society Technologies Advisory Group (ISTAG) Report on "Shaping Europe's Future through ICTs" for instance submits that ICTs are:

"the 'constitutive technology' of the first half of this century, much like electricity or combustion engines have been in the last. ICT does not just enable us to do new things; it shapes how we do them. It transforms, enriches and becomes an integral part of almost everything we do"ⁱⁱⁱ (ISTAG, 2006).

From a global justice perspective, the structural transformation facilitated by ICTs, presents developing countries with a new trajectory of opportunities, as pointed out in an early document 'Road maps towards an information society in Latin America and the

Caribbean' prepared by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC) in 2003:

“In times of normal, incremental technological change, increasing returns to scale tend to strengthen developed countries' leadership positions. However, when a new innovation arises or major structural changes occur, a temporary window of opportunity opens up for less developed countries to catch up ...”^{iv} (UN ECLAC , 2003).

What are the opportunities and challenges for women's empowerment and gender equality, that emerge at this historical juncture, of a paradigmatic shift in the global social and institutional order – especially for women from the Global South? Our paper attempts to address this question, drawing upon insights from the field interventions and research and networking initiatives that IT for Change has undertaken in the areas of exploring the transformational possibilities of ICTs for women's empowerment²; and fostering Southern feminist dialogues on the opportunities and challenges that the information society offers³.

Part 1 : What does the information society offer for women's empowerment and gender equality?

There is no linear relationship between women's access to ICTs and changes to iniquitous gender orders. However, ICTs undoubtedly offer the potential for marginalised women to redefine their 'sense of place'⁴, rupturing boundaries and creating fluidity between what was previously more easily separable into clearly defined, non-overlapping spaces of 'the public' and 'the private'. The public in the network age is defined by new interactivity and zones of anonymity that recast social norms, thus re-writing the forms and meanings of the personal-political and the intimate-private. Opening up avenues for self expression, expanding social networks and opening up opportunities for economic and public-political participation, ICTs hold the potential for emancipation and empowerment^v.

We now discuss the specific areas in which the emergent information society context offers opportunities for overcoming gender inequality and promoting women's empowerment, and

2 For more details, refer to the work of IT for Change's field centre *Prakriye*-Centre for Community Informatics and Development at http://www.itforchange.net/field_centre, Retrieved 14 December 2012.

3 For more details, refer to the CITIGEN-ASIA research programme of IT for Change at <http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/> , Retrieved 14 December 2012.

4 As Dorian Massey has pointed out, “a sense of place [is] an understanding of 'its character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond.”
See http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/91_06_24.pdf Retrieved 14 December 2012.

the challenges that need to be addressed in order to effectively capitalise on these opportunities.

1. Women's individual freedoms : Information society opportunities and challenges

ICTs enable new states of "being and doing"^{vi} and this in turn enables women to acquire and exercise new freedoms. The new spaces carved out by ICTs enable women to develop new social and communication networks, connect across diverse geographies and strengthen collective solidarities. Most importantly, the promise of anonymity in the newly emerging virtual spaces, enables women to exercise their freedom of expression in unprecedented ways – especially in contexts where participation in the public sphere and freedoms of speech and assembly are severely curtailed by repressive and authoritarian state regimes^{vii}. Moreover, the new virtual spaces offer women numerous opportunities for emerging as a 'counterpublic'^{viii} in contexts where the mainstream public spheres are under the sway of local patriarchal regimes colluding with state or religious forces^{ix}

Online spaces opening up opportunities for exercising the right to free speech: The case of Honduras

In 2009, a military coup overthrew the democratically elected president in Honduras. The official version of the facts claims that he was guilty of constitutional disruption for attempting to conduct a popular referendum that would enable him to be re-elected. The Government of Honduras deployed heavy military repression against all demonstrations against the coup. For the first six months after the coup, when state repression was at its peak, the government forcefully influenced all media channels and persecuted the ISP providers. However, in spite of state repression, there were dissenting voices – and most of them had to resort to online spaces for registering their protest against the coup. This was not easy, in a country with low levels of Internet penetration and in a context where the threat of state reprisal was very high. However, activists resisting the coup managed to successfully use the Internet as a space for challenging the official accounts of the coup. As the presence of the voices of resistance on the Internet demonstrate, there were many who were willing to stick their necks out to tell the world what was happening in their country. For example, the local feminist movement organised a group called *Feministas en Resistencia* (Feminists in Resistance), and documented the abuses conducted by the armed forces and broadcast them through a channel on Youtube. In other Latin American countries, women's groups organised demonstrations at the Hondurian embassies in solidarity with the *Feministas en Resistencia* movement. These global ties that the activists in Honduras forged, saved many lives. In instances where participants in the resistance movement were arrested, their peers tapped into the online communication networks, to initiate global protests against the arrest and co-ordinate global action such as requesting groups from across the world to send in letters and faxes demanding the release of the detainees.

Source: Salas,M. (2012), Gender and information society in Central America: Between the immediate and the strategic scenarios, <http://www.gender-is->

citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/Margarita_TP_20Sep.pdf Retrieved 14 December 2012

However, virtual spaces are not entirely safe for women, as they are not totally immune to the threat of state surveillance or the operations of patriarchal controls. As is well acknowledged by women who use virtual spaces for self-expression and forging collective solidarity, women's online communication often attracts threats and intimidations from entrenched patriarchal interests. For a specific instance, see the conflict over women's online denouncements of the infamous "Which actress shall I harass?" radio campaign in Hong Kong^x.

Who is the 'Big Brother' online? - Some reflections on the exercise of individual freedoms in online spaces

There has been a lot of euphoria generated around the open nature of online spaces, especially, social media platforms. However, online spaces are not completely free of threats. States still have the ability to retaliate against citizens who express their dissent (or even unpopular views) in online forums. Recently, a 21-year old girl Shaheen Dhada was arrested in India for posting a status update on Facebook questioning the complete shut-down of cities for the funeral of a popular right-wing leader from the state of Maharashtra - Bal Thackeray. Her friend Renu Srinivas was also arrested for "liking" the update which reportedly read: "People like Thackeray are born and die daily and one should not observe a '*bandh*' [shut-down] for that." The girls were arrested under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for "hurting the religious sentiments of others" and Section 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which specifies the punishment for communication made via computer or other devices which may be "grossly offensive," have a "menacing character," or even cause "annoyance or inconvenience". Section 66(a) has invited wide criticism for its draconian nature. Although there are indications from the Director-General of Police in Maharashtra that the case against the girls will be closed (following the public protests against the arrests), this incident illustrates how the arbitrary powers of the state now extend into online spaces. With digital technologies, the state has the capacity to watch constantly over citizens under, what is termed as, the panopticon.

Threats are not limited to reprisal from governments. Corporates who own social media platforms, even though they often make claims about being defenders of the right to freedom of expression, have been known to exercise arbitrary censorship of content users post, if they sense a threat to their business interests in a specific region. For instance, take the case of 'The Uprising of Women in the Arab World' campaign, whose organisers had created a Facebook page to raise awareness about issues relating to women's rights in the Arab world as well as to create a platform for solidarity with women activists. When a picture of an unveiled Syrian woman holding up her passport (with a veiled picture) and a sign saying "I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because for 20 years I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and my body", was posted on the campaign's page, in October 2012, the picture was removed by Facebook, as it purportedly violated the site's 'community standards', sparking concerns of censorship.

The increasing sexualisation and commodification of online spaces has implied a shift in the politics of representation. From "*an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze*"^{xi}, the constructs of the female body through network society configurations pose

challenges to feminist resistance and pedagogies. Bringing back a critical examination of choice into feminist discussion seems to be an important need. Another concern that is often overlooked is the emergence of new forms of physical, emotional and psychological violence against women^{xii}, in the newly emerging virtual spaces. The growing nexus between the online pornography industry and human trafficking has emerged as an important challenge for ensuring women's bodily integrity in online spaces^{xiii} – but this has not been adequately addressed, as gender equality groups are yet to engage in debates around representation, censorship and regulation.

2. Economic opportunities and challenges for women in the information society

One of the hallmarks of the information society is the rise of information capitalism, that is marked by the creation of a 'techno-industrial' complex where decision making is concentrated in the hands of a few experts, and the management and control of the economy is increasingly centralised^{xiv}.

In such a scenario, ICT skills are increasingly valued, and have the potential to open up opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. While it is true that the possession of ICT skills enables women to access new employment opportunities, most of these jobs are low-skilled, low-paid, and often repetitive. These jobs are also highly footloose, and subject to the vagaries of technological change and the ups and downs of the global financial markets. More crucially, these jobs have not enabled women to creatively use their abilities. Instead, they add to the double-burden of women, because traditional and patriarchal expectations and ideas of women's roles are not keeping pace with the rapid changes to the global, networked economy.

Similarly, ICTs do offer a lot of scope for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in accessing business information, marketing products and building new clientèle. However, considering that such SMEs led by women (especially those located in the Global South) are often on the fringes of the global economy, they are often ill-equipped to handle competition from larger multi-national chains that take advantage of the same opportunities. SMEs also do not receive any protection from governments in the current macro-economic environment.

Falling between the two stools of 'labour' and 'enterprise' : Kerala's programmes on ICTs for women's economic empowerment

The state of Kerala prides itself on its welfarist model of development. It is also one of the few states to consciously design programmes concerning ICTs for the inclusion of marginalised groups into its information society vision. Two specific initiatives that have attempted to explore the potential of ICTs for women's economic empowerment are: *Akshaya* (<http://www.akshaya.kerala.gov.in/>) and *Kudumbashree* (<http://www.kudumbashree.org/>). *Akshaya* is a telecentre initiative, whereby village level kiosks for the delivery of public services, have been set up under a franchisee model, where local level entrepreneurs can come forward to set up and operate these telecentres. The *Akshaya* initiative has in-built incentives to encourage women entrepreneurs to set up such telecentres. The *Kudumbashree* initiative works towards the socio-economic empowerment of women, with the promotion of micro-enterprises (including IT-enterprises) being a key strategy.

A research study of these initiatives, undertaken by IT for Change⁵, reveals an interesting paradox. While state support has indeed opened some doors to a new public life for the women who are a part of these schemes, women have been able to access only low end job opportunities, such as data entry. Many of the women who are part of the *Akshaya* and *Kudumbashree* initiatives belong to the lower socio-economic classes, and lack the material and symbolic resources that are necessary to confront the market in a successful manner. The state seems to have conferred on the women the label of 'entrepreneurs', but without the wherewithal needed to expand their material and symbolic capital. Under the circumstances, women are neither able to realise the benefits of their status as autonomous 'entrepreneurs', being tied to job works that they are obliged to undertake for the government at low rates, nor can they organise as information workers to demand their labour rights. The contradictions arising from such schemes for women's inclusion into the IT economy need to be understood while planning interventions and designing policy.

Where interventions by governments and NGOs exist and efforts to move beyond mere ICT skills training that produce women workers for the information economy have been undertaken, women's SMEs have stood to benefit from the changing structures of the global economy. Such efforts require capacity-building and the institutionalisation of support mechanisms to enable women to take advantage of information society opportunities for entrepreneurship, even in the face of challenges that the mainstream poses. The discussions on Arab Dev's work with women artisans in Egypt^{xv}; and the analysis of the work of SEWA^{xvi} throw light on this kind of 'structural-institutional' approach.

3. Opportunities and challenges for women's public-political participation in the information society

The rise of ICTs and the Internet has enabled the expansion of spaces for women's public-political participation, both in the formal and informal realm. ICTs offer new opportunities

5 See Gurumurthy, A., McLaughlin, L. and Jha, M. (2012), *Labouring women, enterprising states – A research study on women, information technology and narratives of entrepreneurship* (Draft), http://www.itforchange.net/WE-IT_draftreport Retrieved 14 December 2012.

for states to enhance their welfare and service delivery to marginalised women, and improve information outreach about entitlements. There have been numerous experiments by states for setting up ICT-enabled telecentres for improving service delivery to their most marginalised citizens, especially women. However, many such experiments suffer from an excessive focus on developing a viable business model (For e.g., the experience of the Common Service Centre scheme of the Government of India.^{xvii}) when the unique promise of digital mediation is in improved service delivery to, and real participation of, marginalised sections. Additionally, ICTs offer immense opportunities for providing public information in local languages, through voice and text platforms, to constituencies that have historically been on the margins of the public-political sphere, including rural women and women from marginalised groups and/or indigenous groups.

ICTs for inclusive public service delivery: The case of the Mission Convergence programme of the Government of Delhi

Mission Convergence is an initiative of the Government of Delhi that has attempted to set up an ICT-based, convergent, single window service delivery system, to meet the welfare needs of some of the most marginalised communities. The initiative has adopted an innovative government-NGO partnership model towards this, as explained below. Firstly, a vulnerability survey was undertaken in the slums and other underprivileged neighbourhoods to prepare a comprehensive database of beneficiaries. Secondly, an ICT-based system was set up to enable convergence of over 40 welfare schemes that were previously handled by nine different departments, as well as processing and tracking of applications for entitlements. For the receipt of applications on the ground, the Government of Delhi decided to tap into a pre-existing network of Gender Resource Centres that were operational in slum communities and other disadvantaged pockets of Delhi. These Gender Resource Centres had been set up under an earlier government programme, and they were operated by NGOs. The rationale guiding this decision was that the NGOs operating the Gender Resource Centres were already sensitive to the local context and invested in addressing community needs – therefore, their involvement in service delivery would ensure smooth processing of information requests and entitlement claims. To ensure that the NGOs running the centres do not become alternate power structures in the communities intermediating the state-citizen relationship, a monitoring mechanism with representation from the government as well as civil society organisations, has been instituted.

For more details, see <http://www.missionconvergence.org/>

ICTs have also carved out immense opportunities for women's participation in informal politics. There have been numerous experiments, such as women-only blogging communities devoted to particular ideologies and interests; online journals and videos produced by women; and forums and online support groups devoted to feminist concerns.

These digital spaces, especially because of the increasing porosity between the 'private' and the 'public' that they facilitate, allow women to establish connections and build collective solidarities. For meaningful participation in these spaces, women need to be equipped with skills, know-how and information on how ICTs and the Internet can serve their cause in a purposeful way. Mere provisioning of ICT access is not enough. It is also important to recognise that online presence does not guarantee a foothold for marginalised groups to create a counter-discourse through the online public sphere: gaining visibility and recognition is a long, complex process.

Exploring online opportunities for enhancing women's public-political participation: Some reflections from the case of *Likhaan* (Philippines)

Likhaan (Centre for Women's Health) is a grass-roots organisation based in Philippines that has been actively involved in the decade-long campaign for the passage of a Reproductive Health (RH) bill undertaken by women's groups in the country. In 2010, *Likhaan* took up an action-research project as part of IT for Change's CITIGEN-Asia research programme⁶. At the time of the research, women's groups in the Philippines were in their ninth year of advocacy for the passage of a Reproductive Health (RH) bill. In a context where the discourse of the Catholic Church on the reproductive rights of women has been pre-dominant in the public sphere, *Likhaan* wanted to explore ICT-based strategies for channelising into the public debate on reproductive health, the empirical realities of women and youth in marginalised communities.

Therefore, an online magazine was set up by *Likhaan*, with the aim of bringing in the accounts of women and youth from marginalised communities who were most in need of sexual and reproductive health services and rights (SRHR), with the hope that these accounts would ultimately influence lawmakers both directly and through generating public support, and lead into the passing of the reproductive health law. The magazine was hosted on the website of *Likhaan*. The researchers from *Likhaan* spearheading the project noted that while the process was found empowering and useful for the community journalists, the extent of the impact of these stories in strengthening the ongoing struggle for the passage of the RH bill was questionable. There was no direct evidence about instances where the community reporters' stories had been picked up or reported on, by mainstream media. Thus, it was clear that the goal of reaching decision makers, politicians and bridging the grass-roots movement with the broader policy and legislation discourses in the mainstream public sphere was not easy to realise. Obtaining the attention of those who count / people in power and in decision making positions, and finding ways to gain more visibility and recognition for the standpoints of marginalised people, even when their voices are brought into online publics, is not a simple, linear correlation. Policy change is a complex, political process where interests are traded. Creating visibility for subaltern voices may be one part of the strategy.

Source: Estrada-Claudio,S., and Guitierrez III, I. (2012), Bringing the local and intimate to the national and institutional: Using ICTs for legislative advocacy for reproductive health, http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/gender-is-citizenship.net.citigen/files/CITIGEN%20Philippines%20report_Final.pdf Retrieved 14 December 2012.

6 For more details, see <http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/> Retrieved 19 December 2012

Digital spaces also open up new channels for regressive, fundamentalist forces to co-opt women into existing hegemonic discourses that subordinate women and perpetuate unequal gender relations. In Pakistan, the radio has been used by Mullah Fazlullah and his *Tehreek Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) to build a constituency of women supporters for a “perverted version of *jihad* (holy war)” that led to the closure of female education and the bombing of girls' schools in the Swat Province of Pakistan^{xviii}. Thus, dealing with threats and backlashes from patriarchal interest groups remains a challenge, even in the new spaces that have opened up in the information society context.

4. Opportunities and challenges for women's socio-cultural participation in the information society

Digital technologies, because of the flexibility and economy that they have brought to radio and video production processes, have made the 'older' radio and video technologies more accessible and affordable to marginalised groups, especially women. This accessibility to radio and video platforms has enabled numerous community media initiatives that have strengthened women's peer-to-peer and dialogic learning processes. They have also brought women's voices into mainstream debates and discussions in the local public sphere. For example, community radio initiatives have helped in creating spaces for women's involvement in conflict resolution and peace processes (eg. in Philippines and Fiji), in shaping local development agendas including post- disaster reconstruction (eg. Nepal and Indonesia), and in bringing grassroots voices on poverty and food security to the public domain. (The work of Deccan Development Society – <http://www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp> – is noteworthy for organising dalit women farmers and supporting their local media initiatives.)

Similarly, there have been many small-scale community initiatives⁷ that have focussed on using multi-pronged ICT strategies to bring debates and discussions on existing gender relationship architectures into the local public sphere. Such efforts have legitimised women's experiential knowledge, and helped in negotiating gendered asymmetries in informational and communicative power in formal and informal institutions and structures. Of course, there are a number of challenges in setting up such initiatives such as the issue of ensuring appropriate connectivity infrastructure, and development of relevant online content for marginalised groups rooted in oral cultures.

7 For an example of such an initiative, see the work of IT for Change's field centre *Prakriya* at http://www.itforchange.net/field_centre Retrieved 19 December 2012.

Exploring ICT possibilities for enhancing women's socio-cultural participation: Some reflections from the *Mahiti Manthana* project of IT for Change

Mahiti Manthana (literally 'informational churn') is an initiative of IT for Change undertaken in partnership with *Mahila Samakhya*, in Karnataka state of India. *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan Indian governmental programme which works towards the education and empowerment of women from socially and economically disadvantaged sections in rural areas, through a collectivisation strategy of mobilising and organising women into village level collectives (locally known as *sanghas*).

The project has primarily aimed at exploring the possibilities offered by contextualised use of ICTs, for strengthening the empowerment processes of women's collectives (*sanghas*) in three blocks (sub-district level units of local administration also known as *taluks*) of Mysore district.

The project has adopted a three-pronged ICT strategy consisting of:

1. A weekly radio broadcast that is the *sangha* women's own voice in the local public sphere, called *Kelu Sakhi* (Listen, my friend).
2. An on-demand as well as push-based video system for information that women seek, to share inspirational biographies of *sangha* women, as well as to open up debates on gender and patriarchy.
3. A village based telecentre model for public information access called the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Our Information Centre). It is run by *sangha* women in select villages through a young information intermediary, *sakhi* (friend), trained by the women and the *Prakriye* team. The *sakhi* addresses the information needs of the village community and engages with local institutions through a continued dialogue with government departments at the block level to push for transparency and responsiveness.

Mahiti Manthana has had a significant impact in the following areas, as confirmed by a recent evaluation study that IT for Change carried out, in 2010-11:

1. In the villages where the *sangha* women have taken to discussions based on radio broadcasts and to collective video-viewing, a new culture of questioning and seeking information through digital means is evident. Also, a move towards greater *sangha* autonomy and lesser dependency of *sanghas* for their information needs on the programmatic staff of *Mahila Samakhya* is perceptible.
2. The contextually meaningful appropriation of ICTs seems to lead to a greater sense of empowerment. Non-literate *sangha* women reported that their experiences of handling ICTs, using digital learning resources to conduct meetings, and innovating around peer learning processes, without the presence of external facilitators, led to enhanced confidence and self-esteem.
3. The Village Information Centres have been symbolic of a new equation in the community; they have improved women's bargaining power in their village communities and enhanced the community standing of *sanghas*.
4. The proximity of the governance system to the *sanghas* enabled through the project, and a transformation in the local culture towards an entitlements-based access to public information has, to some extent, displaced traditional information gatekeepers.

Sources:

Gurumurthy, A. and Nandini, C. (forthcoming), '*We speak as we are: A qualitative research study on*

the impact of the Mahiti Manthana project', Bengaluru: IT for Change.

Gurumurthy,A. , Vishwanath,K. , Nandini, C., and Jha, M. (2011), A new bottom-up architecture for development: Case studies in community informatics, http://www.itforchange.net/bottom_up_architecture_for_development , Retrieved 14 December 2012.

Sometimes ICTs can be used to restrict women's socio-cultural participation, as they can be harnessed by the power-elite to continue their existing domination over women⁸. On the other hand, in some contexts, entrenched patriarchal interests have tried to prevent women from accessing ICTs⁹, as they fear the new transformatory possibilities opened up by the information age.

Part 2 : Recommendations for policy and practice

The paper proceeds to make some policy and practice recommendations that can help in seizing the information society opportunity for transforming existing gender relationship architectures, and concludes with some recommendations for the post-2015 agenda.

To ensure that women's empowerment and gender equality issues in the information society are addressed completely, the role of ICTs and the Internet in the promotion of gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment must be recognised and included in the formulation of global and national level policy frameworks, global development agendas, such as the post-2015 global development goals, as well as in practice frameworks. It is clear that the importance of ICTs and the Internet will only grow and gain more ground as new forms of participation, connection, networking, employment, culture, citizenship and activism are created within the sphere of the information society. Without access to the necessary tools and skills to become involved in these processes, women and other marginalised groups will only become further marginalised and excluded from development. Keeping this in mind, we propose the following recommendations for policy and practice.

1. Promoting access and effective use of the Internet and ICTs:

Taking advantage of opportunities for enhancing economic, socio-cultural and public-political participation today presupposes a certain level of access to, and membership in, the nascent information society. Participating in the new spaces of communication and

8 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2237382/Saudi-Arabian-men-sent-text-message-wives-leave-enter-country-equal-rights-campaigners-criticise-airport-system.html>

9 <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/12/05/india-bihar-village-phone-banned-elopeme-idINDEE8B403320121205>

networking, and having access to ICTs as tools to promote empowerment and participation, are intrinsic parts of what constitutes today's social capital. The current importance of ICTs and the Internet as tools for poverty reduction, development and as enablers of other rights have been acknowledged in the Millennium Development Goals, as well as in reports of UN Special Rapporteurs, and declarations and policy documents from groups such as the OECD, G8 and the European Council. For example, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Frank La Rue, has made the following statement about the role of the Internet in promoting freedom of opinion and expression:

"Unlike any other medium, the Internet enables individuals to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds instantaneously and inexpensively across national borders. By vastly expanding the capacity of individuals to enjoy their right to freedom of opinion and expression, which is an "enabler" of other human rights, the Internet boosts economic, social and political development, and contributes to the progress of humankind as a whole."^{xix}

In such a scenario, nation states must frame legislations and develop policy frameworks that ensure 'Internet access for all', which must also provide for : 1. Equal access for men and women; 2. Affordable Access; 3. Public Access; and 4. Access to culturally and linguistically diverse content^{xx}. Finland, which made access to broadband a legal right in 2009, leads the way, in this arena.

Providing adequate protection to the privacy, safety and bodily integrity of the users of the Internet and ICTs is another area where global governance frameworks must be clearly evolved – especially in the face of increased online surveillance by authoritarian state regimes^{xxi}.

In order to promote women's access to and effective use of the Internet and ICTs, public interventions with women and girls (whether state-led or civil society-led) must move beyond a narrow development perspective that focusses on providing digital literacy and skill-training to women, and instead recognise the opportunity structures that ICTs offer, for enabling women to become self-determining, capable and independent agents of change^{xxii}.

2. Creating opportunity structures for women in the information society

In order to effectively create opportunity structures for women in the information society context, policy and practice frameworks must move beyond an 'ICTs- as- tools' approach to an approach that recognises "ICTs as a new strategy for empowerment that can shift social power relationships and facilitate institutional transformation towards the realisation of rights of marginalised groups"^{xxiii}

In specific, we have the following policy and practice recommendations to offer^{xxiv}.

A. A shift from ICT policies to information society policies is needed to address the wider social and gender dimensions of the information society .

- Governments need to recognise that ICTs are not just an economic sector; the media related aspects of ICTs have a strong bearing on issues of culture, democracy, development and social transformation. ICT policies cannot be entirely dictated by technocratic and economic concerns.
- ICTs need to be seen in their larger social role, and therefore an 'information society' framework, instead of an 'ICT' framework provides a good starting point in the emergent context.
- A separate information society machinery is needed to be developed within governments to highlight the myriad and very significant social aspects of ICT-led changes. It may be noted that the European Union (EU) and many European countries have set up new institutional frameworks and empowered Commissions to address the changing techno-social context. Among developing countries, South Africa has also done so.
- At national levels, the ICT ministry or department needs to delimit its purview to technical and infrastructural responsibilities, while the Ministry for Women should deal with substantive information society issues concerning gender.

B. Policies and law need to keep pace with the threat of violence against women in digital spaces. Measures to address violence against women in digital spaces need to recognise both women's 'public', political rights as well as 'private', individual rights.

- In the name of protection, ICT access cannot be cast as a dangerous proposition. As much as the appropriation of new ICTs and membership in the emerging public sphere is fraught with risks and dangers, it is in fact the very basis of expansion of capabilities for women's citizenship in the emerging social order. Therefore, measures to address digital dangers need to emphasise online safety and security in an empowering rather than alarmist way.
- Concerns about online violence bring to the fore the question of what is violence and who decides this. The subjectivity of the woman victim becomes central to resolving what may be seen as violence. While the state should be able to prosecute those engaged in violence against women, state power to undertake surveillance in general, without adequate basis, is likely to infringe on women's privacy. The state's duty to intervene and prosecute violence when it happens online should not become an excuse for surveillance over the Internet.

C. A capabilities approach to ICT provisioning is imperative for the inclusion of marginalised women in the emerging information economy

- While IT sector employment opportunities, training and e-literacy skills are vital for women to participate equally in the information society, special initiatives on e-commerce that provide wide ranging institutional support to women producers (particularly small producers) and artisans to compete in global markets are also needed.

D. ICT systems need to be integrated with local development action plans not only for greater efficiency but also to promote women's public-political participation

- A major roadblock at the community level preventing poor women's access to information of various kinds – about livelihoods, entitlements, public services - is information gate-keeping by local level male elite and information brokers who mediate women's access to public information. ICT-enabled transparency of institutions, complemented by community monitoring and action by women's groups, can have radically transformative impacts for women's right to livelihood, health, employment, etc.

- The Right to Information Act in many countries in Asia is being seen as an institutional remedy for the inclusion of the marginalised. In this regard, ICT systems create a 'push' for putting information in the public domain.
- Strengthening efforts towards greater decentralisation of governance using ICTs, and use of ICTs to build the capacities of women representatives in local governance are important areas of women's empowerment.
- Local ICT infrastructure like publicly supported telecentres can be critical for women to access information on rights and for accessing justice systems. For instance, in Mongolia, IT kiosks have been used to allow women in remote communities to file complaints directly to Family Courts. It is to be noted that while public information infrastructure can make a huge difference to the lives of marginalised women, privatised ICT approaches will not have the incentive to address the information needs of the poorest women. This calls for a need to revisit the adequacy of the innumerable private sector initiatives in ushering in real empowerment.

E. Women's empowerment and gender equality need a robust public sphere where multiple voices can be heard.

- The convergence of technologies, and of ICT and media spaces, needs to be addressed in a manner that keeps citizen interests foremost.
- Grassroots community media projects need to be supported, and women's groups provided the support and incentives for local media/ content production.
- Public service broadcast continues to plan a key social role; however, in the new context it can and needs to be made much more participatory and bottom-up, with new ICT possibilities that allow marginalised women to create, share and broadcast knowledge.

3. Building equitable techno-architectures

Key to the question of gender justice in the emerging structures of the information society is protecting the rights of users (especially when the users are marginalised women from the Global South) to open technical standards and a 'democratic, interoperable and collaborative Internet'^{xxv} – in other words, their rights to equitable techno-architectures. The concerns that must be addressed in this area, are detailed below.

A. Regulation of market excesses (especially on the Internet)

The regulation of market excesses must be addressed if we want to ensure a 'democratic, interoperable and collaborative Internet'. The promise that the Internet offers for building and promoting alternative informational and knowledge networks, is largely because of the Internet's ability to be neutral to the content that flows over it, unlike earlier communication platforms. However, in the current context, this foundational principle (otherwise termed as 'net neutrality') is under threat.

Advocates of digital rights and freedoms see net neutrality as fundamental for ensuring that the Internet remains a free and open technology, fostering democratic communication. Social campaigns have pointed to how cable and telecommunications companies seek to be Internet gatekeepers, deciding which websites go fast or slow and which won't load at all. According to SaveTheInternet.com for instance, companies want to "tax content providers to guarantee speedy delivery of their data ... to discriminate in favor of their own search engines, Internet phone services, and streaming video – while slowing down or blocking their competitors." Scholars like Lessig have pointed out that without net neutrality, a handful of massive companies would control access and distribution of content, deciding what you get to see and how much it costs^{xxvi}. Thus,

“unless Wikipedia and WHO pay up enough, which they may not be able to as much Pfizer for instance, the sources of information that you will be directed to will be drug companies, or possibly “corporate social responsibility” fronts set up by them which subtly filter information towards serving their company's interests^{xxvii}”.

The fact that companies currently have the right to influence users while storing user data like browsing history, text messages and call history on their servers, points to the invasiveness of corporate control into our everyday information, knowledge, communication and relationship architectures^{xxviii}. The rise of market power in the network society context also poses a serious threat to concerns about the commons. Online publics where women's movements build counter-culture and solidarity to challenge entrenched patriarchal values and norms in the dominant institutional and social order are in many ways 'compromised' publics.

The case of the *Pink Chaddi* campaign is instructive in this regard, in enabling us to understand the challenges to social or cultural action in online spheres, because of the power of social media corporates to exercise arbitrary censorship (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_Chaddi_Campaign).

Similarly, the power of huge digital media companies to enforce copyright legislation on online spaces, and put in place mechanisms that block or remove content which reportedly violates copyright laws, poses another challenge for free expression and women's informational and communicational linkages on the web. While the odd case of Youtube removing Michelle Obama's speech for alleged copyright violation^{xxix} may get attention, the plight of local content producers who creatively re-interpret and re-use mainstream media content, in local awareness generation and information networking efforts, remains unaddressed.

The lack of appropriate global regulatory frameworks to control market excesses in the newly emerging digital spaces continues to remain an important challenge. At national and global levels, powerful corporate players who have a vested interest in maintaining the current status quo on the lack of internationally agreed principles and policies to govern the Internet and digital spaces, play upon the legitimate fears that civil society actors have about state control of the global Internet. The co-option of the discourse of 'freedom of expression' by corporate interests eclipses the real debate on the need for appropriate governance of the Internet and digital spaces. States have the task of re-visiting policy frameworks in order to guarantee individual liberties, protect public interest and prevent market excesses in the network age. The evolution of global regulatory frameworks for the Internet and other digital spaces is the responsibility of nation-states. However, women's groups have an important role to play in ensuring that the regulation of digital spaces does not become an excuse for the 'information state' and its surveillance apparatus to take away spaces for contention and the unprecedented opportunity for re-imagining democracy in the network society.

B. Building an open ICT ecosystem

Another crucial aspect in building equitable techno-architectures is in ensuring that the ICT eco-system remains open. However, in the present scenario, there are inequalities and exclusions in the construction of the space of technology itself – which have not been adequately addressed by existing policy frameworks or even by ICTD practitioners working

towards gender equality in the information society. For instance, the current celebration of mobiles as the panacea for women's empowerment glosses over the fact that in dominant mobile platforms, unlike the Internet, "the network is entirely proprietary and is not agnostic to different digital content providers."^{xxx} Mobile network providers offer certain applications that are pre-loaded for free, locking-in users to certain digital environments. Unless there is a fundamental transformation in the existing mobile telephony architecture to make it open, it would be misleading to envision mobiles as the most appropriate technology for poor women despite the fact that mobile wireless communication transforms private and public life. In fact as Castells et. al. have argued, it is quite possible that mobile communication can even exacerbate gender related inequities^{xxxi}. Asserting that technology does not determine society, but technology *is* society, they establish the fact that the talk around mobiles can only be understood in social terms as a social practice. The diffusion and use of mobile telephony is certainly iconic of a shift toward a new 'personal communication society' and this has predominantly included new forms of coordination and social networking, personalisation of public spaces and a new youth culture^{xxxii}. However, emancipatory possibilities through mobiles in the network society require new trajectories that can privilege marginalised women's interests, generating meanings and symbolisms of networks that serve democracy and social justice. These trajectories, as has been mentioned, will need an institutional environment guiding a rights-based local information society where active feminist appropriation thrives.

Similarly, it is important that global and national policies protect and promote open software, open hardware, open content, open networks and open spectrum – to ensure that the ICT ecosystem is accessible and affordable to all. The role of national governments in setting and promoting Open Standards and Public Software, especially in e-governance related ICT ecosystems is critical.

Conclusion : Scoping Gender equality for the post-2015 agenda

The onus of harnessing information society opportunities for gender equality and women's empowerment, to a great extent, continues to rest on national governments. Creating an enabling environment that can ensure women's effective use of ICTs and access to the multi-dimensional opportunity structures that the information society offers– as was pointed out at the very beginning – is a matter of socio-political choice. In this context,

where national governments have a crucial role, it becomes extremely important to include the concerns of gender equality and women's empowerment in the information society, in evolving the post 2015 development agenda.

The Post-2015 agenda, therefore, both in terms of goals and related targets and indicators, has to promote and measure women's and girls' participation in the information society and their access and effective use of the Internet and ICTs; support their empowerment; and provide them with new methods and venues for meaningful participation in politics, decision making, income generating activities as well as cultural and social aspects of the societies they live in. Examining the existing high level goals, indicators and frameworks at the global level in this area would be useful to identify the current gaps that the Post-2015 agenda should address.

The importance of the opportunities opened up by the new ICTs for the promotion of women's individual freedoms, economic empowerment, public-political participation and socio-cultural empowerment are acknowledged in a number of international framework documents¹⁰ such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the Declaration from the World Summit on the Information Society (2003). (For a detailed discussion on existing framework documents in the areas of women's individual freedoms and ICTs, women's economic empowerment and ICTs, women's public/political participation and ICTs, and women's social/cultural participation and ICTs – see **Annex 1.**)

However, existing high-level goals, targets and indicators do not make specific connections between ICTs and women's rights. At present, the role of ICTs is only measured in the Millennium Development Goals under Goal 8: *Develop a global partnership for development*, through Target 8.F: *In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications*. Target 8.F. has been criticised by women's groups for not adequately including women's effective participation as a measurement or indicator for the target. Access to or use of ICTs and the Internet is not a target, nor a measured indicator, for any of the other seven Goals, including Goal 3: *Promote gender equality and empower women*.

Considering these gaps, the question of gender and ICTs in evolving the Post-2015 agenda has to be framed in the following manner:

¹⁰ The actual influence that these global normative frameworks wield is of course debatable, considering that at present, there are no rules or regulations around the global Internet that apply to all nations and all peoples. This has resulted in a normative and regulatory vacuum, which has by and large seen the take-over of the digital commons for profit and power and much ad-hocism in the way national governments, especially from developing countries, address new and complex socio-legal issues implicating digital spaces (from blocking sites to limiting smses and dealing with a host of cyber crime issues).

1. There should be a specific goal related to the meaningful and effective use of ICTs and the Internet, that is measured through gender sensitive targets and indicators. This should take into account the quality of access, and not just availability.

2. There should be a specific goal related to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment that takes into account access to and effective use of ICTs and the Internet as a target (with appropriate indicators) within the goal. The larger goal of women's empowerment in the contemporary information society cannot be dis-embedded from the context that ICTs are creating.

3. To facilitate a nuanced assessment, the indicators that are evolved under the above-mentioned goals must capture the individual-household, public-institutional and community-social aspects of access to, and use of, ICTs and the Internet. One possible way of evolving indicators is illustrated in the box below.

Evolving indicators that capture the individual-household, public-institutional and community-social aspects of access to, and use of, ICTs and the Internet

1. Individual-household aspect, must capture:

- a. access to broadband
- b. access to mobile networks
- c. cost / tariffs

Possible indicators include:

- Proportion of households with broadband Internet access
- Percentage of women accessing the Internet, in the households with broadband Internet access
- Mobile cellular telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants
- Proportion of women in the total number of mobile cellular telephone subscribers
- Fixed broadband Internet access tariffs per month as a percentage of income.

2. Public-institutional aspect, must capture:

- a. ICT-enablement of local public agencies and authorities
- b. Public access points / Internet kiosk availability and accessibility

Possible indicators include:

- Percentage of public agencies at the district and sub-district levels with web presence
- Percentage of public agencies at the district and sub-district levels with web presence in local language
- Free public access points per 100 inhabitants
- Paid public access points per 100 inhabitants
- Proportion of women visitors in the total number of visitors accessing the free and paid public access points

3. Community-social aspect, must capture:

- a. Use of ICTs for higher functionalities
- b. Depth of ICT penetration

Possible indicators include:

- Percentage of Internet users using peer-to-peer functionalities beyond browsing and email;
- Proportion of women in the total number of Internet users using peer-to-peer functionalities beyond browsing and email;
- Percentage of small enterprises with web presence at the district and sub-district levels
- Proportion of women entrepreneurs in the total number of small enterprises with web presence at the district and sub-district levels
- Percentage of NGOs with web presence at the district and sub-district levels

Source: Based on the presentation made by Anita Gurumurthy at the 'Post 2015 Development Agenda – Mumbai Consultation' organised by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in August 2012, http://www.itforchange.net/Presentation_Mumbai_Consultation_Post_2015_Development_Aug2012, Retrieved 28 January 2012

Finally, understanding the role that ICTs and the Internet play in the realisation of other goals and targets that are not directly ICT-related is crucial. Whether we are talking about women's empowerment, engaging men and boys for gender equality, providing women with better access to income generating activities, equal access to and quality of education for girls and boys, health care services or political participation, the role of ICTs and the Internet becomes non-negotiable. The Post-2015 agenda and the new Goals must therefore include targets and nuanced indicators specifically designed to measure access to, and effective use of ICTs and the Internet for reaching the set Goals, and this measurement has to happen in a gender-sensitive and sex-disaggregated manner.

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