Seeking Feminist Engagement with Internet Governance

Who runs and shapes the Internet?
The emergence of what is being called an 'information society' has wrought a transformation that throws new challenges and opportunities for feminism. One such important area for feminist engagement concerns the question: who shapes the Internet, and the ways in which it functions, and what impact does that have on the Internet's evolution? Does the Internet operate autonomously through the energies and collective intelligence of the billions who use it? Or, is it shaped by dominant forces, bringing them a new legitimacy and a heightened virulence? **Can feminists influence the shaping of the Internet, and through it, the new social paradigm of the emerging information society?**

What does the Internet do, that may make it so crucial to influence its evolution?
The transformative impact of the Internet is so pervasive that it implicates many areas of feminist engagement. The Internet creates new social spaces, and rearranges existing social relationships and structures through the new and complex forms of social interaction that it makes possible. As new digital spaces create what Amartya Sen has called new states of 'being and doing', both opportunities and challenges for feminism arise. Thus, the Internet provides new structures and possibilities of networking for solidarity across community, regional, and national boundaries – a key basis for democratizing and strengthening feminist struggles. But it also reconfigures the relationship between the public and the private, as well as the institutions of family, marriage, community, market and the state. And it shapes new global paradigms, redefining trade and intellectual property regimes. In this context, it is crucial that we, as feminists, reimagine the social paradigms of law and justice, equity and citizenship. **For feminists, engagement with the Internet and its constitutive forces is critical – to expand the critiques of global political economy, patriarchal capitalism and neo-liberal development *and* to reframe questions of freedom, choice and rights.**

What is Internet Governance, and what are the possibilities for feminists to participate in this?
Although a crucial space, the governance of the Internet, officially Internet Governance (IG), is still in its formative stages. It is, most of all, marked by an intense contestation over its control. On the one hand are the Internet Service Providers who so far have been formulating the rules that govern their activities themselves, and increasingly do so with the support of powerful private sector interests like intellectual property (IP) lobbies. On the other hand are nation-states trying to control the new trans-national phenomenon of the Internet. Caught in this cross-fire, progressive interests including feminism are confronted by a devil-and-deep-sea situation. These contestations deeply threaten the interests of the marginalized, posing formidable challenges for their claims to the information society and leaving few spaces for influence.

The United Nations - Internet Governance Forum (IGF) came out of the inconclusive negotiations at the World Summit of the Information Society in 2005. Set up as a 'policy dialogue forum' to facilitate global Internet policy processes, it is still a fledgling body. However, it is relatively more representative of people and social groups across the world than other IG spaces, and still not completely captured by vested interests. **The IGF therefore provides an important space for engagement by progressive feminists in a context where global governance structures and processes suffer from glaring democratic deficits.**

What are the specific issues at IGF?
The IGF will hold its 3rd annual meeting in Hyderabad, India in less than a month (3rd to 6th December, 2008). **One overall agenda for engagement in the IG space is that existing Internet policies predominantly support a market-oriented regulatory framework; of an 'if-it-is-good-for-the-market-it-is-good-for-you' variety.** Market fundamentalist frames have always posed a huge threat to feminist visions of progress and change. It is important therefore to develop a sound theoretical basis for an alternative framework for Internet policies. Many civil society actors have begun to propose a rights-based approach to the

Internet. A strong advocacy around this platform is planned at the IGF meeting in Hyderabad. For feminists, this is a strategic space for alliances to engender a rights-based approach to the Internet.

The IGF program is built over four main sets of issues, with a daily plenary devoted to each set. These broad themes and the key issues under each are described below in brief. The effort is to present an indicative landscape of issues, through the exploratory lens of a rights-based approach, in order to trigger a process of building a position paper on feminist perspectives as an intervention during the IGF proceedings.

<u>Access and diversity</u>: Can access to the Internet be construed as a right? What parallels do we see derive from existing rights like the right to education and of political participation? Since the Internet represents an increasingly important set of capabilities, can a capability rights approach be deployed especially for elaborating differentiated access? How do various diversity related rights - linguistic, minority and indigenous rights apply to Internet policies? What would be the basis of anti-discrimination for a women's rights framework *vis-à-vis* the Internet? Can a citizenship framework inform Internet access policies instead of market frameworks? Should we speak of 'participation' in relation to the Internet rather than just 'access'?

<u>Security and Openness</u>: How are States trying to impose controls on and through the Internet, constraining women's freedom of expression and association? How are dominant market interests threatening the 'public-ness' of the Internet? How are market and statist interests increasingly aligning in evolving a 'controllable' Internet? How do feminist positions on access to, and appropriation of, knowledge relate to digital spaces? Do open-technology paradigms serve feminists better? How do concerns around women's privacy intersect with those about security?

<u>Technical governance of the Internet</u>: How does the rationale of 'technical expertise' employed to construct the Internet as an apolitical phenomenon, masquerade its political control by dominant interests? Is there a need to establish the gendered nature of technology, and explore what kind of governance will feminize Internet technologies? How does public policy ensure women's interests, and specifically obtain women's rights vis-à-vis the Internet?

<u>Review of the IGF</u>: The IGF was mandated for 5 years initially, with a review planned in 2009-10. This review process will, in some ways, start during the IGF, Hyderabad. What are feminist positions on democratic global governance? How important is it to articulate and represent differential interests of different people and groups, including of women, and also the primacy of distributive politics in IG? What is the role of the IGF in moving towards such a democratic and progressive global Internet policy regime? What changes should be made in the IGF, and what directions should it evolve in?

Feminists can engage at the forthcoming meeting of the IGF by circulating a position paper; making planned interventions in sessions; and strengthening the *Dynamic Coalition on Gender and Internet Governance,* a partly official space that informs the IGF.