

Feminist Frameworks in the Information Society

Network society is game changing. In the past couple of years, we have seen popular discourse around the radical possibilities of tweeting and mobilising through social networking come of age, but at the same time, there is also a sense of discontent that the corporatised digital environment may not be the final frontier of freedoms. This is not yet another rant from the techno-sceptic old guard that has held the view that online space is a distraction, quite unrelated to social and gender transformation. Instead, it is from the die-hard geeks and liberals who have been forced to look at the disappearing paradigm of the digital commons that they swore by. The usurpation of the public spaces online by private corporate interests has slowly but surely become a necessary part of digital literacy in these times.

The Occupy movement itself has been contemplating a 'Facebook for the 99%', even as post-uprising events in the Arab countries have had to grapple with old questions about the structures of power that feminists have always raised. The brave, new digital world seems not so pertinent in these conversations and battlegrounds. The 'Twitter revolution' seems to be unable to deal with the hard questions of democracy in the current phase of change. Two things are clear: One, power, as it plays out through the structures and hierarchies of digital spaces, must be studied more closely as it intertwines with everyday reality, especially in reinforcing and creating structures of exploitation and marginalisation. Two, making the technological relevant to social transformation is a higher order process; it does not just happen. It must be claimed through contestation.

At IT for Change, we have found Southern feminism to offer worthy tools for this approach to enquiry and to the search for alternatives. By foregrounding power to interpret context, body, collectivity and aspirations in network society dialogues, our work on gender has created convincing and coherent analytical frameworks on engaging and reclaiming power in digitally mediated realities.

This year saw the 'Gender and citizenship in the information society in Asia' (CITIGEN-ASIA) research programme (<http://gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/>) provide a concrete context for feminist network building in our work. The programme raised broader questions on gender, citizenship, development, participation and power through its constituent projects, think pieces, discussions and debates on issues of space (invited/invented spaces, multiple counter-publics and alternative public spheres), women's participation and representation in governance structures and right to communicate. This endeavour has simultaneously helped shape the next International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded programme initiated in 2012, which we are undertaking in partnership with scholars and organisations in South Africa and Brazil. The new programme, Women-gov (<http://gender-is-citizenship.net/women-and-governance/>) will explore how the characteristics of digital technologies can be suitably employed to create participatory models in governance such that they enable socially and economically marginalised women to gain centre stage in local democratic structures.

Research

Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society

In 2010, IT for Change, supported by IDRC, set up a two-year programme – CITIGEN-ASIA – to explore the evolving nature of citizenship of marginalised women in the global South in relation to the emerging information society. It was critical to examine from a feminist standpoint what the techno-social paradigm is, how it is reconstituting social structures and systems and what emergent patterns of power, participation and publics look like. We felt that looking at the challenges and opportunities for women's citizenship as they are shaped by new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in relation to specific social and institutional

ecologies, would enable us to construct a bigger picture. The idea was to build theory, but more importantly, provide concepts for feminist action. Building a network of researchers and activists on information society and gender issues in Asia was also a strong incentive. The programme helped catalyse a very strong community of scholars and practitioners. With feminist and media organisations in Asia, like the Women and Media Collective (WMC) in Sri Lanka, Hong Kong In-media in Hong Kong, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) in Thailand, *Likhaan* in Philippines, and leading academic spaces such as the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, and Centre for Women's Studies, University of Philippines, we pushed forward the mandate to mainstream network society debates through critical feminist perspectives. (See Box 1). To enrich the debates within the network, feminist practitioners and scholars from Asia and other regions were invited to join the network and to author think pieces that flag issues around gender, women's citizenship and network society. These shorter works were complementary to the empirical research. Prominent scholars, such as Farida Shaheed (Director of Research in *Shirkat Gah* – Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan), Supinya Klangnarong (Vice-Chair of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, Thailand), Margarita Salas (independent consultant, Costa Rica), Heike Jensen (independent gender researcher and consultant, Germany), Desiree Lewis (Associate Professor, University of the Western Cape, South Africa) and Crystal Orderson (SABC News, South Africa), explored intersections between the micro-context of community information ecologies and macro socio-political phenomena in their think pieces. (See Box 2).

The CITIGEN-ASIA programme has created a platform for feminist thinkers and activists to shape network society debates. By balancing research processes with free-wheeling conversations, the programme has opened up a space for grounded theory. The network concretised its ideas also through two face-to-face meetings. In mid-2011, emerging concepts and tentative theories from the ongoing work in the CITIGEN-ASIA network were presented as 'Stories of Change' (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/Narratives_of_change), tracing movements in the work being undertaken across Asia. It was felt that feminist theorising around information

Box 1. The CITIGEN-ASIA research programme

Research teams in the CITIGEN-ASIA programme explored intersections between marginalised women's citizenship and their participation in the network society. Using desk research, empirical studies and action research methodologies, they traced out the contextual interconnections, offering a commentary on the challenges and opportunities for marginalised women in the emerging techno-social context.

The research carried out by **APWLD, Thailand**, found through a survey in Taiwan and Hong Kong that the mobile phone is a vital tool to garner information, communicate and organise, for migrant women domestic workers. The study highlights the need for policy makers to look at the right to communicate and hence, the right to access communication tools and platforms as basic rights, especially for migrant women domestic workers. It elaborates the ways in which barriers to access take place in the social and regulatory practices, providing relevant policy recommendations.

The team from **Women and Media Collective** studied marginalised women's engagement with different forms of new media in the Sri Lankan context. The study offers a critique of the impact of state ICT policies on women's engagement with new media. It also discusses how alternative, women-owned, local media spaces can enable women to come together and create the context for them to articulate their perspectives on democracy and citizenship.

The **India** team created a network of women leaders in local governance through a digital platform, *Gramamukhya*, providing an innovative point of departure for catalysing a sense of solidarity among the women and a connection to the women's movement in Kerala. The potential of ICTs was harnessed to provide alternative spaces for the articulation of women's voices.

The team from **China** used qualitative methods to study the emerging techno-social paradigm in the Chinese context in relation to women's engagement and practice of citizenship, online. Their study explores the dynamics of the multiple counter-publics and alternative public spheres in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, two distinctly different cities under the regimes respectively, of post-colonialism and authoritarianism.

The **Filipino** team undertook an action research project, which sought to explore whether and how ICTs can play a role in influencing lawmakers both directly and through the mobilisation of public opinion, to pass a reproductive health law that accounts for the realities of those most in need of access to sexual and reproductive health services and rights.

Box 2. Think-pieces from the CITIGEN-ASIA programme

The CITIGEN-ASIA network invited scholars to explore a key idea that can offer a critical feminist perspective on the connection between the network society and feminist action.

Heike Jensen, in her piece, argues that prevalent discussions on Internet governance and citizenship are gender-blind. She therefore finds a feminist unpacking of communication rights and censorship as well as privacy and surveillance instructive in locating power and politics in the network society discourse.

Margarita Salas offers a critique of the feminist movements of Central America, analysing their distance from the information society debates and inability to grapple with the structural aspects of ICTs. She explores how feminist movements have used ICTs in their struggles, including against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, but have neglected the information society policy arena.

Desiree Lewis and **Crystal Orderson's** think piece outlines how alternative and new media driven mainly by black women in the southern African region have sought to address the limitations of mainstream traditions in the representation of the issue of sexual violence. The authors also look at how social media and mobile-based networks can be relevant for activism.

Supinya Klangnarong talks about the 'free culture' among netizens in her think piece on contemporary Thai society. How this 'free culture' challenges traditional values and authoritarian/conservative mindsets, and whether the common identity of netizens is gender inclusive, is the key focus of her enquiry.

Farida Shaheed seeks to understand how emerging techno-social paradigms shaped by new ICTs do, and can, recast the citizenship of women in a deeply patriarchal society like Pakistan. Acknowledging that ICTs are communication tools that facilitate social organisation, she also reminds us that access to ICTs as public sphere/space does not necessarily translate into shifting paradigms of citizenship in favour of women; outcomes depend on who is using such media, and with what agenda in mind.

society was an urgent imperative (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/CITIGEN_Workshop%20Report.pdf). In early 2012, the knowledge outputs of the CITIGEN-ASIA research network were ready. A research validation meeting was organised at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru (India) to revisit the research findings and re-map the analytical field along with new and old members of the network. How the findings of CITIGEN-ASIA can reframe feminist knowledge and praxis in this emerging domain was at the core of the discussions. The report of this workshop captures these conversations on, and framings of, network society (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/uploads/CITIGEN_RVM_complete.pdf). The wisdom from the collective works of CITIGEN-ASIA points to how the still-nebulous contours of emerging information societies arise in and through situated, social experiences. While some technological propensities may be a given, the frontier for feminist inquiry is in the subversive spaces where the technological is always appropriated by the social, and new meanings are

continuously emergent. The research programme also shows how the question of appropriation of digital spaces connects to foundational questions that concern corporate and state control and ownership of these spaces. While communities and solidarities in the digital ecology push the boundaries of space, state authority (surveillance and censorship) and corporate hegemony (the capitalist logic of Web 2.0 platforms, search engines, mobile networks, etc.) constrain the meanings of 'participation' and 'membership' in these networks of choice. It may be possible for women to create 'alternative' spaces and strengthen their agency through digital technologies. However, the open spaces of small networks in the big, global digital network that subsumes them cannot be truly open unless they are protected from corporate exploitation and expediency, as well as state authoritarianism and tyranny. These guarantees presuppose democratic and participatory governance of the network society and its constitutive digital elements, with appropriate public policies at national, transnational and global levels that enable communities of solidarity to form and sustain as truly open, 'public' spaces.

“ ***I would like to express my thanks to IT for Change for facilitating an excellent workshop. It was really useful and inspiring. The kindness of the team was keenly felt and appreciated. Overall, we feel that this collaboration has been just what Women and Media Collective needed at this point in our work and our lives!*** ”

Sepali Kottogoda, Director, Women and Media Collective

Unfortunately, appropriate public policies in this area are conspicuous by their absence at national and global levels. CITIGEN-ASIA is now on its final lap and in the upcoming months, the synthesis report from the programme is expected to be released. The outputs of the research have been reproduced in shorter versions, including as policy briefs and summaries (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/policy_brief and http://gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/uploads/Think_Pieces.pdf). Also, a collaboration with *Zubaan Books*, an independent, non-profit publishing house is being explored, to compile the research in an accessible form for wider dissemination.

India-Based Research to Influence Policy and Practice

The past couple of years have also seen a focus on policy research in the Indian context. Along with Dr. Lisa McLaughlin from Miami University, we had initiated a deeper enquiry around the question of women's empowerment in relation to ICT enterprises, through a collaborative research project. The study looked at the *Akshaya* project of the Government of Kerala and also AWAKE, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Bengaluru that works for women entrepreneurs. The research (http://itforchange.net/WE-IT_draftreport), completed this year, has found that ICT policies that aim to include women through developmentalist approaches to enterprises, end up co-opting them as sub-contracted agents of the state. Such approaches create a paradox where women with low-end Information Technology (IT) skills make forays into the public sphere as 'entrepreneurs' running IT services shops, but their status as data entry workers dependent on job-works from the state leaves them bereft of both bargaining power as empowered workers and of autonomy over their own labour. Further, state incentives for girls in engineering colleges at the cost of investments in creative skill-building among poorer and less educated young women reinforce and perpetuate a job market stratified by class divides. Therefore, the grand narrative of empowerment through ICTs needs to be unpacked for the manner in which policies do and do not support new pathways for transformative change and gender equality. The study also found that NGOs supporting women entrepreneurs would need to look at becoming a stronger political voice that can engage in policy level dialogue.

IT for Change also initiated a study to scope out information centres, run by NGOs and the government, examining the possibilities for using telecentres as spaces for women's political education and citizenship. Preliminary insights indicate that the nature of the network space and its possibilities for structural power shift are still not completely grasped by NGOs and the government. For instance, community telecentres run by NGOs

“ *Our collaboration with IT for Change has allowed us to benefit from a community of researchers and thinkers who engaged, challenged and influenced our work. We developed new advocacy positions that we have taken globally on migrant domestic worker rights. We expanded our own approach to ICT as an organising tool but also as a politicised and contested space. Thanks so much to IT for Change for the opportunity to engage in thoughtful research and discussion around ICT and democracy from a feminist perspective. It expanded our capabilities!*

Kate Lappin, Regional Coordinator, APWLD

may not necessarily be designed to privilege claims-making by marginalised women. Even if they do create channels for access to public information, they may not be able to visualise 'telecentre networks' as a new, strategic opportunity, to further the objectives to mobilise and organise women. Instead, state efforts may, through large-scale data management processes, use telecentres for targeting individual benefits and co-opting NGOs for operational reach and 'success'. However, their lack of focus on

bringing to the fore the voices of the most marginal women into governance and public service delivery can result in an unequal partnership between civil society and the state in the governance arena.

Women-Gov – A Response to Top-Down e-Gov

In early 2012, IT for Change embarked on laying the ground for a new action research process - a three-country project, 'Women-Gov' (<http://gender-is-citizenship.net/women-and-governance/>). The project grew from the

shared enthusiasm among IT for Change and our partners to use ICTs for making local democracy and governance work for women. 'Women-Gov' seeks to address the de-contextualised and de-politicised discourse of e-governance, through an alternative feminist practice of technology that can bring the voices of the poorest and most marginalised women into mainstream discourse. The programme will work with local NGOs in India, Brazil and South Africa that are engaged in promoting the rights and entitlements of marginalised women to examine how digital technologies can be suitably employed for their empowerment. Using an action research



Sangha members during a recording in the field.

approach, this project posits four vectors of gendered power shifts – informational, communicative, associational and collective action, vis-à-vis processes of local democracy and governance.

In India, IT for Change will continue to partner with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka, our close ally, in community informatics praxis through *Prakriye*, our field unit. We will work with the inspiring dalit women leaders of *Samakhya*'s local collectives. Instituto NUPEF (<http://nupef.org.br/>) from Brazil and the New Women's Movement - Young Women's Chapter in South Africa will be our partners in the other research sites. The lead researchers in these countries will be Graciela Selaimen from Brazil, and Desiree Lewis and Crystal Orderson from South Africa.

In February 2012, the partners met in Bengaluru to explore ideas for the action research. Since then, the projects have begun groundwork with their respective constituencies. A wider meeting of the researchers along with resource persons is expected to take place in May, in order to brainstorm the specifics of the intervention and action research.

Advocacy and Networking

Our impact in pushing the envelope on engendering information society debates with Southern feminist content and, conversely, bringing a structural and analytical lens of the network society context into feminist discussions has become more visible over the years. We are making an impact in diverse spaces as our inputs are sought for global and local policy and social change processes. For instance, we are actively engaged in academic spaces:

- Chloé Zollman and Arpita Joshi made a presentation (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/MobilePlus_Presentation.pdf) entitled 'Recasting the potential of mobile phones for gender equality' at the MobilePlus Conference, organised by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (Chennai), in September 2011. The presentation reflected a nuanced perspective on 'going mobile', deconstructing the celebratory tone of the rhetoric around the mobile revolution.

- Following her presentation and participation in the conference on 'Gender equity policies - New scenarios, actors and articulations' (Buenos Aires, Argentina in November 2010), Anita Gurumurthy wrote a chapter entitled 'Scenarios, actors and articulations - A feminist, network society reading', which includes insights from CITIGEN, for a publication by The Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO), called 'Gender Equity in prospective: research and policies'.

- The fifth international conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD 2012) hosted at the Georgia Institute of Technology was held in March 2012 in Atlanta, USA. CITIGEN-ASIA held an open session titled, 'How the information society recasts women's citizenship – Stories from the CITIGEN programme' at the conference, using a combination of video clips and presentations from the network members (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/News_and_Events#ICTD).

In addition to the academic spaces, we have strived to remain relevant to activist agenda:

- With APWLD, we have generated interest around how their activism in the region can embrace digital technologies. Not only did APWLD participate as one of the core research teams in the CITIGEN-ASIA programme, but they have also been collaborators in many other spaces, including ICTD 2012, mentioned above. APWLD invited other CITIGEN-ASIA teams to their 'Women in Politics' Conference held in East Timor in September 2011 to reflect on the issues and challenges that women's participation in politics has thrown up. We were invited again to build connections with the Asia Pacific Feminist Forum organised by APWLD in Chiang Mai, Thailand in December 2011. Anita Gurusurthy represented the network and anchored a participatory session with activists from the region on 'Using technology to empower women'.

- At the sixth Internet Governance Forum in September 2011, we participated in a pre-event workshop on 'Internet Governance and Women's Rights' organised by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). The emerging findings of CITIGEN-ASIA were shared.

- Nandini C. participated in the Southern Regional Conference organised by National Mission for the Empowerment of Women, in Bengaluru, held March 15-16, 2012. The conference was mainly a discussion forum for government officials, activists, NGOs and academics to deliberate on strategies for enabling a suitable convergence of policy and institutional frameworks for women's empowerment.

Our participation in global forums has also been a useful way to 'mainstream' our perspectives:

- Anita Gurusurthy attended the UN Women workshop on 'Leading Innovations for Gender Responsible Service Delivery' in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in June 2011. She spoke on 'What information and communication technologies can do for gender responsive service delivery' (<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un-dpadm/unpan046612.pdf>), presenting IT for Change's field-based experiences through *Prakriye* and the CITIGEN-ASIA programme.

- In response to an invitation, IT for Change participated in an e-discussion on 'New media and democratic space' organised by the United Nations Development Programme's Asia Pacific Regional Centre. The emerging insights from the CITIGEN-ASIA programme were presented here (http://gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/e-discussion_on_social_media_and_democratic_space%20.pdf).

“ We've been working with IT for Change in different spaces and initiatives for some years, and the exchange and interactions has brought to our team valuable learning, important experiences and a strengthening feeling of solidarity. Nupef and IT for Change share many similar views about the most pressing challenges of our times, as NGOs from the global South facing powerful forces while pushing - in several arenas - for the respect and defense of human rights, taking into special consideration the needs of the most poor, excluded and vulnerable people. Nupef feels honoured in being a partner of IT for Change.

Graciela Selaimen, Coordinator, Instituto Nupef

Looking Ahead

The coming year will emphasise the process of consolidating the insights from our research in the past couple of years. We plan to disseminate writings about our field efforts through *Prakriye*, on the women and ICT enterprises discourse, and on the design of women's empowerment programmes on the ground. We will author articles and essays that can provide an analytical perspective. The work with *Zubaan* Books will enable a revisiting and synthesising of the work done through CITIGEN-ASIA, thus contributing to Southern feminist theory building efforts in the emerging arena of network society politics. The 'Women-Gov' project promises to take us back to the litmus test of our relevance. We will engage in ethical experimentation of techno-social methodologies including Geographic Information System (GIS) and mobile phones to see how women's struggles for accountable governance are shaped and influenced by feminist ICT frameworks. Finally, we envision that our strategic dialogues with feminist activists and scholars from the global South will continue, as we also step up our national level advocacy on radical approaches to development in the network society that privilege the voices of women.