

Critical Voices: Women's Perspectives on the Role of the Information Society in Fostering Human Development

Panel organized by the Gender Caucus

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The fundamental challenge for information society in fostering human development, I think, is to address human development within a human rights framework. The question therefore is - what conditions will allow for ICTs to promote the development of people that is based on principles of justice and equity.

The global political landscape that is redefining the architecture of information societies throws up several concerns from a rights perspective. I attempt to capture the complex interplay of critical global, national and local forces, in analyzing the intersection of human development and the new economy.

- **Indisputably**, the new economy is thriving on the destruction of knowledge and livelihoods of the South.

Knowledge is claimed to be a continuing invention of the 'new world' and its messiahs. The packaging, branding and re-branding of knowledge within a global IPR regime is far from benign; it demonstrates, as Third World commentators have pointed out, the impunity with which universities, research institutions and corporates in the North thrive as parasites and predators on the knowledge resources of the South. At local levels, communities are forced to reckon with the corporatisation of agriculture, a mainstay of their livelihoods in most developing economies, and at national levels, the future prospects for any meaningful technological research and growth are heavily stifled. The prominent ICTs for Development model takes this tragedy a step further. Take for instance, the much-celebrated e-choupal initiative from India. The global corporate ITC, set up a network of farmers to maximize agricultural output from the hinterland that it sources its raw material from. Information about cropping, fertilizers etc. are given through this network. One of the very first things that ITC did after the network was put in place, was to distribute seeds from Monsanto to these farmers. What this seemingly facilitatory act hides is the concomitant "new dependencies" on global agri-support industries like fertilizers and credit and the inevitable debt-trap that has already consumed thousands of lives. The "benefits" in terms of better productivity

and ensured markets to farmers notwithstanding these initiatives hardly redress the global crisis in agriculture and food security. They directly further the corporate control of agriculture.

- **The new economy and its new 'production' chains are no different from in the same old assembly lines from post-industrial societies.**

Women workers are concentrated in at the lowest and poorest paid parts of the new production chain. In a country like India that has lock, stock and barrel, joined the BPO bandwagon, it is educated, urban women who can hope to find employment in this sector. Anecdotal evidence indicates the profitability in this sector for pimps who recruit women for the call sector industry on exploitative terms. Local level initiatives that have attempted to train poor women to find employment in the ICT industry have faced enormous difficulties. Social biases are tenacious impediments that prevent the entry of poor women into the corridors of the over-valorised, ICT industry. At national levels, most countries in the South continue to pay poor policy attention to building the human resources of girls, taking IT education to rural areas, investing in public infrastructure, and encouraging girls and women to define and innovate in new technologies. Policies, on the other hand eagerly sell the labour of their women and youth to neo-liberal capitalism that thrives on an increasingly disempowering division of labour for developing economies. National labour laws, in most cases have yet to come to grips with the new trans-national labour modalities and are impotent in protecting the interests of domestic workers.

- **The use of ICTs in realising human development goals is constrained by the larger socio-economic context, which itself is rooted in neo-liberal policies.**

Nations in the global South, are hardpressed to address widespread poverty and hunger, because of the neo-liberal obsession with deficit-containment and the subsequent pursuit of policies driven by the logic of the market rather than welfare and equity. Globalization has meant the loss of self-reliance, de-industrialisation, privatization, destruction of natural resources and the retreat of labour protection. From rural hinterlands of global cities like Hyderabad, celebrated as the national cyber-capital in India, emerge narratives of despair that have been referred to in literature as the "peripheralisation of poverty". Andhra Pradesh state, of which Hyderabad is the capital, is witness to increasing suicides of poor farmers and weavers, and starvation deaths as also the increasing militancy of underserved marginalized people. These are testimonies to the far-reaching impact of neo-liberal globalisation on human life. ICTs can only build on a supportive economic environment that takes the poverty bull by the horns. This will demand correctives at national levels that address agricultural productivity, and non-agricultural employment, especially in rural areas. At a global level, the WTO regime, that has so far held a clear bias for the North, needs to be dismantled. At Cancun, the US was

unwilling to budge in agriculture, nor to give anything on the cotton issue where four West African countries – Benin, Burkino Faso, Mali and Chad -- had made a powerful call for the elimination of cotton subsidies and demanded compensation.

Against this backdrop signaling the power of corporate-driven global economics, ICTs can do little to redress injustices and vulnerabilities. ICT efforts that seek to bring information resources such as market prices of agricultural commodities, to local communities seem passé in face of the above analysis. They have enormous value for those who have the means to belong in the marketplace, but insofar as they are not relevant to the vast majority, they only add up to widening inequities. The redefining of power relations has long since been held as a possible solution to structural poverty. The introduction of ICTs have not made any impact on this. On the contrary, they have only strengthened the existing skewness by creating new polarizations.

- **The geographical politics of the global economy accentuates inequities at national levels.**

The new economy seems to bring in a new dynamic in global cities which are hubs of transnationally-integrated activity. Traditional sectors in these cities are increasingly pushed into the informal economy since they are unable to compete with the extremely high profit-making capabilities of the new firms, which bid up the prices of commercial space, industrial services, and other business needs. These global cities become sites of stark polarization: the super-profits of neo-liberal capital are embedded in the invisible and cheap manual labour of the poor in these cities; in global cities like Bangalore public infrastructure does not address the needs of the urban poor - fly-overs are rapidly crisscrossing the city's horizons to respond to the phenomenal addition in the number of cars on the road while public transport is a casualty.

- **The level playing field is an established myth from a resource availability point of view.**

International aid is already taking the direction of the micro-management of poverty, and of an abandonment of the rights and concerns of the global South. Political economy and history seem to have lost significance and aid operates today in niche-areas, as if poverty is a given and the poor need external mediation to 'cope'. In literature this shift is captured in the change from poverty *eradication* to poverty *alleviation*. The moral responsibility for and financial burdens of development of people in the South are being transferred to the South. In the meanwhile, governments in the South are cutting back on development expenditure. At Prepcom 3 of the WSIS, poor countries in Africa proposed a Digital Solidarity Agenda for mobilizing financial and technological resources for improved ICT

access by poor countries. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are facing tremendous challenges to address poverty and HIV/ AIDS, agendas fundamental to their development. Under neo-liberal prescriptions, countries in these regions have cut-back on their social development expenditure. How then can we hope to draw upon the much-touted miracles of ICTs?

- **A disastrous consequence of the unavailability of resources to finance ICT for Development initiatives is the transfer of costs to the end-user. The flip-side is the construction and deployment of e-governance as a tool of efficiency rather than of public service.**

Anxious to get on to the e-governance bandwagon, governments in the South have begun to use ICTs for transacting with citizens. E-governance models with rural outreach have certainly reduced the time and financial costs for citizens. However, the deployment of ICT resources makes this endeavour of reaching the citizen a cost-intensive exercise for governments. Investments are therefore mobilized through the involvement of the private sector. The logical extension of this has been in the pricing of public information delivered through community access points. Ironically, information about government schemes and entitlements for poor women and other marginalized groups is also charged.

This scenario portends the recasting of the citizen as client – a new dimension to the marketisation of governance. Public information is commodified and thus hierarchies in access characterize the emergent information society. The chasm between the “haves” and “have-nots” is being widened by the new cleavage – “the connected” and the “un-connected”.

In South Asia, and particularly in India, where e-governance is no longer in infancy, governments have done little to create the technological environment at local levels through investments in communications infrastructure or deployment of low-cost , simple ICT tools, or creation and dissemination of content for development and social justice. Paradoxically, huge funds are expended merely for the automation of government departments.

The promise of e-governance for the poor and the marginalized, including women is in the spaces it can create for these groups to engage with social policy. However, the primary motivation for e-governance seems to be in using IT for greater efficiency. IT is harnessed for managing and administering as also for centralized surveillance. The finances of thrift groups of women across several thousand villages are tracked with the aid of IT by the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. Unless governments can build into e-governance, elements beyond efficiency, they will be guilty of overlooking social justice goals. Since the market has no incentive to reach the

poorest, governments have a responsibility to. Participation of and accountability to the poorest and the marginalized needs to be intrinsic to the design and deployment of e-governance.

- **Gender-mainstreaming approaches to ICT for Development initiatives undermine the political task of women's empowerment.**

Development practice has sometimes been guilty of constructing the poor woman as an instrument to manage poverty. The efficiency paradigm underlying micro-credit institutions in the development sector has instrumentalised poor women. The overgeneralizations of the feminisation of poverty, the construction of the poor woman as responsible (and implicitly of poor men as irresponsible), and the undermining of men's role in community development have placed undue burden on women to face and address development challenges. It has also implied a long history of a crisis at conceptual and implementation levels to involve men for gender equality.

Many ICT initiatives that attempt to address development goals are no different in their treatment of gender. A recent review of local initiatives in South Asia suggests that many projects that work with women take an efficiency perspective and look at women as means of development delivery. In many forums, ICT solutions for addressing poverty and gender seem to be reduced to and discussed as synonymous with the use of ICTs for financial data management of micro-finance institutions. This is a very narrow perspective.

It is not enough to make women managers of community owned technological assets (as do some projects that involve women's self-help groups to run community access points). Through ICTs, women need to find new opportunities for well-being – knowledge and skills that directly impacts their economic returns, better access to health and education; and new spaces for setting agendas. Unless the design of policies, programmes and projects addresses the politics of gender, they will fail at women's empowerment. This means many things. Women's agency, critical thinking, negotiation and choice have to be part of the model used for ICT diffusion. It also means using ICTs to address women's manifold experiences as workers, producers, managers, care-givers, and autonomous human beings.

It may seem paranoid to construe a real danger that women might get instrumentalised in the information delivery process. But it is worthwhile I think to push ourselves to address substantive issues related to women's status and rights through the deployment of ICTs.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting the absence of empowering alternatives at the local level. Myriad innovations exist all over the South that demonstrate the democratic face of technology. Radio and video have been appropriated by women to push their agendas; there are cheaper hardware options and solutions to connectivity that make access in rural areas possible; local language and open source software are being used in many projects; content is being created in a bottom-up manner; health, education and livelihood needs of women and the marginalised are being directly impacted through ICT-mediated interventions; and entrepreneurial models that encourage ICT diffusion at the community level exist. These developments reflect the micro reality of technology diffusion. But the reality is that most ICT models at micro-level seem to offer options in a larger environment of shrinking choices. For micro-models and innovations to become central to the global discourse, the rules of the game in the global arena have to alter. At WSIS, negotiations between governments, as over anything that implicates global justice, will result in the adoption of the lowest common denominator. Voicing this cynicism is necessary forethought for civil society. Our battles may have converged at this historical point; but they are far from won. Hope lies in the proclivity of ICTs for political change and it is in this that women from the South can take heart.

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