**Women Contesting the 'Information Society': From the
Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) to the World Summit
on the Information Society (WSIS 2003, 2005) and Beyond**

It is quite possible that some of us here have not followed the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) closely and are not quite so sure what the import of this Summit may be to women of the world. But it is certainly not possible that any of us here has not felt in a palpable way changes attributable to the strides in ICTs that may be traced from the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in the year 1995, to now – when the WSIS is in progress. Even the most clairvoyant among us could not have anticipated the power of the information age, and the far-reaching and tactile changes that it signifies.

I think that from Beijing to now – feminist thought and struggle have had to contend with change that point to a need for fundamental shifts in our politics. Feminists have pointed to the changing political landscape of their engagement in the UN process, tracing shifts in the ideological underpinnings that have informed the development and rights discourse within the UN process. Ewa Charkiewicz[1] points to the following developments.

- Shifts in the underlying ideologies informing the notion of development – from social justice frameworks to neo-liberal frameworks over the decade of the 90s;

- The consequent emergence of a feminist vocabulary that increasingly resorted to making a business case for gender equity through arguments for the integration of women based on cost-benefit calculations, and efficiencies to be gained by the integration of women, and a valorization of this approach as against the social justice approach;

- A reorganization of feminist engagement – from movements based forms to NGOs based ones necessitated by funding guidelines and UN access rules and a shift towards a model that delinked the social movement from the grassroots.

The engagements at WSIS point to the ground reality of this changing landscape – of the paradox of seemingly progressive language of multistakeholderism and partnerships coexisting with diminishing legitimacy for ethical frameworks of equality and social justice.

The call for a World Summit on the Information Society itself was in recognition of rapid societal changes - the new paradigm of an emerging information society (IS). And indeed, in this transition to the world of the digital, key institutions of society and governance are in a flux that provides new spaces for renegotiating gender.

The caution and disillusionment of feminists with respect to global negotiations, and of the evolutionary path of development and gender politics on the one hand, and the alluring promise of subversion and transformation that ICTs connote on the other, poses for women, a dilemma that is somewhat eternal I would think, to the feminist project itself. That of engaging with institutional actors including the nation state as well as of confronting them to resist their tyranny. The twist in the tale though is that the rapid nature of changes that comprise the transition to the information society imply such a quantum shift that the terrain of engagement is still nebulous and hence the what and the how of engagement and of disengagement are themselves really hard to define.

---

[1] Beyond Good and Evil: Notes on Global Feminist Advocacy, by Ewa Charkiewicz, in Women in Action, http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia2-04/ewa.htm

The Journey of ICTs from the Vantage of Development

I think it is useful, particularly for those of us here who may be uninitiated to ICTD (the concept that is at the heart of what is arguably a new 'development' discourse) to understand what the basic ICT strategy in developing countries has done for women.

In a slight departure, I take you back to Beijing .. where the need both for mainstreaming and targeting as a two-pronged strategy towards women's empowerment was affirmed. By the end of the millennium, it was amply clear that all was not well with mainstreaming. At one end, we had participatory development and its tools pass off as the most inclusive methods to account for the women of the community, and at the other, we had sophisticated policies supposedly integrated into the work of governmental machineries and international donor agencies. Both have eluded women in more ways than one – community based decision-making processes we know are not benign or sterile situations where power does not exist, and hence women's 'participation' in these cannot be presumed to mainstream their interests. Research shows how such processes merely endorse elite male views. The mainstreaming of policy at the highest levels has often meant an unproblematic "one-size-fits all" approach, contradictory to the very meaning of gender and the diversity of local contexts in which women struggle to claim gains – big and small.

The rise of ICTD as a new deliverance for the rural South has reconfirmed the failures of gender mainstreaming. Beyond the targeting of women to set up and run telecentres or communication services, little thought has gone into what the information society and its goodies can do for promoting women's voice and rights, and expanding women's spheres of influence. Further, motivated mainly by the compelling logic of economics and management, the deployment of ICTs has jettisoned concerns for local development priorities, and has followed a path "well suited to the generalist needs of …..national governments, multilateral treaty organizations, national development agencies and quangos, and interested vendors. From the more professionalized standpoint of such organizations, the virtues of a self-similar (read centralized) model are obvious: professionalized and scalable management structures, standardized procedures, streamlined procurement systems, increased cost controls, and so on"[2], as if empowerment in the information age is all about "provisioning" technological gizmos. The upshot has been the addition of yet another layer of 'development intervention' that further consolidates unequal structures of power in local contexts. In many villages, ICT deployment purportedly seeking to ameliorate inequities has become the new tool that advances the interests of global transnationals, the state and dominant social groups, subjecting the local to the decisions of the state or the private sector.

For long, women in the developing world have been subject to the oppression of external "expertise" on the path to their autonomy. The deployment of ICTs has seen models downloaded on local contexts that have pushed for the virtues of the market. The origins and the genesis of ICTD owes much to the affirmation of the private sector as the necessary route to the participation of the South in the information society. That the information society encompasses concerns beyond jobs and BPOs, or mere 'access' to hardware and software, and in fact requires the active intervention of policy at global and national levels is almost completely eclipsed in the archetypal ICTD formula. The affinities of development to neoliberal thought move one notch higher in ICTD, which has repackaged the market as panacea, the torchbearer of development in the information age, providing the vital infrastructure for connectivity. Whether the market will provide cost effective connectivity infrastructure and how it will provide the appropriate content to

---

[2] Thoughts on the telecenter as a model for ICT deployment in the rural "South", draft [02] memo for the Social Sciences Research Council, Ted Byfield.
www.ssrc.org/programs/itic/publications/knowledge_report/memos/byfieldmemo1.pdf

meet women's information and communication needs is of course anybody's guess. We are in a situation today where market failure in the area of ICTs is sought to be made a non-issue.

Snapshots of Change that Challenge the Skeptic

Within the discursive terrain that indicates centralizing tendencies, elements of change and struggle are also crystallizing as institutions are reinventing themselves in the digital age. The meaning of egovernance is not only in the increased reach of public services, but the very transformation of institutions of government – the entrenched systems of exploitation and exclusion – deriving from secrecy and lack of transparency, of corruption and systemic denial of entitlements to people. The paradigms of government are indeed in great transition today in many developing countries – information about entitlements is available online in the public domain today, complaints and grievances can be registered online and need not be made after walking miles and negotiating the dismissive attitudes of local officials. It is the exclusion from institutions in the public domain that is at the heart of disenfranchisement of marginalized groups.The access to institutions and the little pieces of not so insignificant information that women can potentially enjoy in these changing paradigms was quite unthinkable in earlier paradigms.

The moment is ripe for women to seize. Take the case of the Right to Information Movement in India. Women have been able to use the very frameworks of law and rights, to demand information from local government offices that reconstruct their realities in fundamental ways. Women have fought the officialdom that denied them wages for public works, to have access to records and in open public forums exposed the officials who rigged the records and hid them, denying women their rightful wages. This is an example of the power of information to reconstruct truth that actually may be a question of life and death for daily wage workers. ICTs can amplify greatly the validity of legal-policy frameworks for the poorest by creating the set of conditions that make it possible for them to assert and realize their rights to seek information that matters. Indeed information technology will always have to remain subservient to the agenda of political struggles, to be a vital link for the poor and women to articulate their issues in the public domain, to assert their voices, and to demand their rights. But the opportunity is that in the reshaping of their relationship with institutions, the most vulnerable women can redefine their identity and reclaim their citizenship. Albeit within the framework of the state, which may seem to the wise feminist as a dangerous location, the possibilities for institutional revamp suggest a way out of some of the impasse and failures of gender mainstreaming approaches.

During Beijing, feminist advocates did articulate the opportunities for women in the emergence of new communications technologies. But much of the conceptualization around ICTs at that point was around how the Internet would provide new spaces for alternate voices. Post-Beijing, feminists have even critiqued the hope vested in the potential of the Internet as naïve, arguing that this space is also characterised by the hegemony of a capitalist globalising discourse even though offering spaces for resistance. The place of participatory media and in the context of poor women, the role of older, more affordable technologies was sought to be reinstated[3]. However, feminist thought requires to move beyond both these positions - the limiting assumption of the Internet as just a site of communication, and of the critique of the Internet as a hegemonic project. From Beijing to now, the validity of women's information and communication needs and of the need for contextual intervention, has not changed. But the task now is for feminism to capture the institutional shifts that the Internet makes possible through discontinuity of earlier paradigms. The subsuming of ICTs under media and communications analysis is inadequate to understand from an institutional standpoint, the possibilities of transformation in gender relations in the IS.

---

[3] Denise M. Y. Cheung, " An Empowering Global Discourse? Information Communication Technology (ICT), Media and women's empowerment in the Beijing Platform for Action and its review",
http://www.antenna.nl/viio/paper-denise-2001.html

To be or not to be or where to be? - Feminist Pragmatism in the Information Society

Critics may well point to how in grappling with and defining the impetus to the feminist cause in the information society, an excessive reliance on the frameworks of legality and policy are counterproductive. Can feminism be served by state controlled ICT projects, even if they promote women's access to public services, or give them a voice in development through more open channels of communication with governance structures, etc? Is access to ICTs defined in this way, not tantamount to models of bestowal reminiscent of welfare and largesse? If capitalism and patriarchy are old enemies, the state has been no perfect partner either. So should women trust policy as an instrument of gender equality?

A healthy suspicion of the state is admittedly a truism for feminist struggles, and yet the context of the information society is of hitherto unavailable opportunity for women to redefine their relationships with institutions. Not engaging with the mainstream discourse to reshape agenda is not an option. The locations of change are the ones that impact women directly - whether local (like the health institutions, the agriculture extension system, the social welfare department etc) or global (like the structure/s that is/are in the making for the governance of the Internet.) These locations entrenched as they may be in dominant ideologies are also sites for resistance and transformation and women need to be there even if they may be to many of us the slippery terrain where notions of empowerment and gender are not understood for their political essence. This engagement however, does not exhaust the possibilities for feminism in the information society.

The subjective and collective interpretation of ICTs by women, and by poor women struggling for survival and rights, is possible only when they begin on their own to interpret and shape the new language that these technologies constitute. This means that women everywhere depending on their location need to set their own agenda. This may be through using new institutional opportunities, creating their own digital content, setting up ICT based enterprises, connecting with their counterparts in other countries, bolstering their grassroots struggles with online campaigns, or running FM radio stations that address their needs for learning and leisure and struggles alike. And while a case may indeed be made for building capacities, for local interventions, public infrastructure points, and refurbishing development delivery through ICTs, the political content of ICTs is what will serve feminism best.

So where do we go from here?

The handholding of women to exploit technology solutions and to co-opt technology in their struggles, is obviously an important concern. The role of progressive community based groups that have engaged in the articulation and assertion of women's rights in building these capacities is extremely critical at this point. Governments – both local and central – have different but equally important roles in enabling women's participation in and control of the directions of the changing paradigms of the information society. It is only on the top of social investments in connectivity and progressive regulatory regimes that allow for local agencies and actors to own, use and control ICTs for their own purposes that any empowerment possibilities can be envisaged.

The very architecture of the society and polity - the freedoms allowed and denied - are in fact intrinsic to these enabling conditions. In the absence of fundamental freedoms, the meaning of ICTs for women will always be constituted through external mediation – by their men, by the nation state, by business, by religious institutions, for motives that range from benevolent patriarchy, paranoid repression, ruthless profiteering to cultural policing. Indeed the discourse of ICTs and the seeds for change that it contains is most threatening to dominant interests. It is just a few days ago that the Iranian authorities banned civil society groups from meeting on the 24th of

August around information society issues. The license for FM radio is still not available to community groups in India despite years of active lobbying by grassroots groups. The struggles around these issues are foundational for feminist politics in the information society.

There are innumerable contradictions in the emerging information society for women. Brazilian women's groups are concerned about the involvement of religious fundamentalists in the country's positions at WSIS – positions which many women's groups also espouse - around issues like open source and more recently about US top level domain registration (.xxx) pertaining to pornography. Our politics and alliances need to stay functional and relevant as also principled and rooted.

Also activism in the information age is at the danger of following the Castellian logic – those on the network are poised for greater gains. The alienation of movements from IS debates points to a great gap in feminist pedagogy – of the need for democratizing the debates so that a few of us do not construct reality in its entirety.

A last word. And this is about WSIS. The often missing and yet a clinching link to empowerment is in the dialectic between institutions – family, community etc.- and the individual woman. The victories that women have had reside in the reconstitution of their agency into influence; the change that their self-image and identity go through as they gain increased legitimacy and begin to matter. These are the small but sure beginnings of social change. Even as the foundational principles of Beijing and WSIS affirm the need for women's empowerment, the web of women's empowerment is indeed a highly localized process, occurring in the time and space coordinates of gender relations as they are constructed within the local. To be meaningful, ICTs will have to acquire the shape of the local and much has to happen outside WSIS and the contestations, compromises and rhetorical victories of global policy processes.

At best the ongoing WSIS forum may be seen as an expression of the aspirations for a just and equitable information society. The contestations at WSIS around financing ICTs, open source software, market fundamentalism, and the silences around what may be possible for the poor of this world - open paradigms of knowledge sharing that are not about scientific journals but about content that are closer to the realities of poor women, for example - suggest alignments that are of deep significance – for geo-politics and for who will finally comprise the information society. Perhaps much cannot be expected of what is left of WSIS because it is grappling with issues in motion – the rearticulation of old territories of struggle – pornography, knowledge production, ownership and control, resources for development etc. The road beyond WSIS needs to pave the way for a feminist discourse that moves away from claims for a piece of the cake, based merely on sloganeering about being on the fringes, and offers strong resistance to the hegemonic and stronger analytical frameworks which propose alternatives.

At WSIS, civil society groups from the North have tended to argue in favour of the fundamental freedoms that is associated with the new paradigms made possible by technology, asserting that WSIS is really about privacy, the right to communicate, freedom from surveillance etc. But we need to straddle both rights and needs together, privileging development and freedom equally within a single agenda of social transformation. There are no dichotomies here. The emancipatory ideals of feminism cannot be claimed merely by instrumentalising ICTs for meeting basic needs, And then again, what is the meaning of freedom to own and control ICTs unless our bodies are well enough to claim and enjoy the freedom?