Workshop on 'Gendered Digital in the Network Society'- 3-4 February 2017

Report

A workshop on Gendered Digital in Network Society, was conducted by IT for Change on 3rd and 4th February 2017. The workshop, which was supported by the Genderlogues program of the India office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), introduced and unpacked multiple debates surrounding gender and technology to students of development from Azim Premji University. The event started with a panel discussion on the first day – 'A Feminist lens on a Digital India.' The session was headed by Bishakha Datta from Point of View, Usha Ramanathan, legal scholar, and Anita Gurumurthy, from IT for Change. Panelists looked at the phenomenon of Digital India, clearly one of the most ambitious and wide ranging governance initiatives to date - for its macro and micro implications for gender. The panel (read full report) saw rich interaction amongst the students and panelists, and warmed up the stage for the full day workshop on 4th February, which involved lectures, discussions and activities by the IT for Change research team.

In the opening session of Day 2, Damyanty Sridharan, Senior Adviser, Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, FES India Office, presented the findings of the study 'Political Feminism in India'. The study traced the work done by feminists in the field of gender equality, starting from the discourse of women's empowerment, developing into women in development and now, gender in development. Damyanty, in her presentation, took participants through the genesis of the feminist movement and women's organisation in India, rooted in 19th century social reform movement and the 20th century freedom movement, and traced the work of second wave feminists in the late 1960's who worked to radicalise Indian politics and bring women's leadership in organisational structures, and into research and action. She concluded her presentation by elaborating on the third wave of feminism which has given new avenues of expression, activism and ascent for previously excluded groups including – Dalit women, tribal women, women of colour, women from the post-colonial countries, women with disabilities, women from ethnic and religious minorities and women with alternate sexuality.

This session was followed by a lecture on 'Gender, Digital Technologies and Transformative Change' by Anita Gurumurthy from IT for Change. The lecture highlighted the historical trajectories of gender and the digital, with insights into the changes in the design of the latter and its implications on society. Initially, the Internet was viewed as empowering for women, a place where 'the constraints of the body that make women vulnerable seemed to evaporate all of a sudden', women could be anything on the Internet or they could be themselves. The Internet was also more horizontal - anyone could create an HTML and share it around their networks, without search engines optimizing content and pushing paid information on users. Web 3.0 on the other hand is a commercial, stream model, wherein one needs to pay the monopoly (knowingly or unknowingly) to be heard, read or to simply, to be out there in the web space. Anita stressed on the urgency for citizens to have a deeper understanding of the technical so that it doesn't become tyrannical.

At the national level, particularly, the war against freedom of expression is at its peak and that sadly, the digital is manipulated to become complicit in this. The fight for what is democratic is silenced with threat. Women are especially vulnerable. Twitter trolls and physical threats, such as in the case of Bela Bhatia, are the tip of the ice-berg of harassment women face, and a reflection of the quality of our democracy.

The third session was a panel on 'Women's rights beyond the offline-online binary - building theory ground-up'. The panelists for the session were Nandini Chami from IT for Change, Patrick Reuther from FES India Office and Amrita Vasudevan from IT for Change. The session was moderated by Anita Gurumurthy. The panel discussion featured key findings from research on women's relationship with digital technologies.

Nandini focussed on the right to access, and the gendered repercussions of the architectures of access. Noting that the "structures of the networks are such that often times there is a knowledge colonialism, and these knowledge politics of the Internet will not make sense to anyone who doesn't have an understanding of the hegemonies," she explained how platforms tend to restrict users inside their 'walled gardens'. Facebook, for instance, is for some, the only Internet they know.

Amrita's presentation dealt with online violence against women and a feminist approach to dealing with such violence. Technology mediated violence against women has been detrimental to women's participation in the public sphere. The legal framework must be based on principles of consent, that is, personal autonomy, informational privacy and bodily integrity, and public harm that understands violence as an attack on the dignity and integrity of women.

Based on IT for Change's research on the subject, Amrita urged for the amendment of outdated language in colonial laws. There needs to be a shift in the protectionist language of the law to one that recognizes the autonomy of women and other vulnerable groups, and the sovereignty over their own bodies and lives. This also gives legitimacy to the subjective experience of women who are facing/or have faced violence/assault and harassment.

Patrick's presentation highlighted how the abysmal levels women's access to technology should come as no surprise to us given the extremely low levels of women's participation in the workforce, business or even, in policy making. Women are reduced to merely targets of welfare, but whose needs are ignored by the state. Rather than encouraging their participation, they are discouraged to break these walls and the concept of protection is used under the garb of welfare.

The bigger question thus for us to think about is: What are the alternative approaches to make access, innovation, law and policy more democratic and inclusive? How might the right to access be bolstered? In what ways can communities intervene in building a commons model of development of the digital? How can women have an active say in designing a digital society, polity and economy that is equally theirs?

In the second half of the day, the workshop delved deeper into these debates through more interactive methods. Students were involved in a group activity wherein they brainstormed, debated and discussed various issues using case studies and readings that were shared with them earlier. Students also worked in groups at the end of the day to articulate and draft principles for 'A feminist manifesto of the digital'.

As an educational experience, the workshop was successful in exposing students to a variety of concepts through readings, activities, lectures and discussion on issues of data, access, online expression, surveillance, digital policy and so on. By giving participants an opportunity to examine their everyday digital lives from a gendered lens, it expanded their scope for critical thinking. On a larger level, given that the field is still fairly nascent but quickly evolving, the workshop was able to bridge a critical knowledge gap for students of development. It has also generated resource material that can be re-used and adapted for various pedagogical purposes.