'ICTs as an Inclusionary Imperative: A Seminar on Gender and Information & Communication Technologies'

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A few years ago when I heard the term disruptive technologies I didn't quite understand what was being meant, till of course I learnt that it was a business terminology that referred to how some innovations overturn the existing dominant technology or product or business models in the market. It is widely acknowledged today that what desktop publishing did to traditional publishing and what digital photography has done to film photography are examples of disruptive innovations. Of course there are innumerable other examples that do suggest disruptive innovations in the times we live in, on which the verdict is still not out, often not so much on the intrinsic superiority of the new technologies but about their appropriate business models, and these include Internet Video on Demand and IPTV versus cable TV; and VoIP vs. traditional telephone and mobile phone service.

However, what is true is that beyond the world of products and business, these very innovations are changing our world, reconstituting our social relationships. There is more to these innovations that concern our existence in social and political terms than we are often aware.

The most significant point that seems to often escape our consciousness in respect of the information age is the fact that it is not really about new technologies that enable us to communicate and share information differently. It is about how older realities get displaced by new ones in the way ICTs shape personal and institutional relationships. The shifting axes between the private and public in these times of flux connote and contain the seeds of a gendered transformation, described by the Islamic scholar Fatema Mernissi as al-fitna raqmiya (digital chaos), the destruction of space frontiers by the new Information Technologies. She defines this as the strategic issue mobilizing the Arab World today - the key problem giving anxiety fits to elites and masses, to heads of states and street-vendors, to men and women in the Arab world today is, what she calls as 'the digital chaos' induced by IT, such as the internet and the satellite, which has destroyed the hudud, the space frontier which divided the universe into a sheltered private arena where women and children were supposed to be protected, and a public one where adult males exercised their presumed problem-solving authority.

This new public which is being constituted – and its unformed character - is what we need to see as a new site for feminism. And while it is true that old forms of exploitation are reproduced in new ways in the (Information Society) IS, and the case for addressing patriarchy as a sphere of cultural reproduction remains strong, feminist engagement has

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also to be in relation to the new disruptive potential -the shifts that hold the possibilities of making patriarchy a **contested** domain.

This potential for discontinuity of institutional norms and arrangements has also been noted by many scholars. What is widely recognized as the disruptive potential of new technologies for business models is also disruptive of social institutions and the gendered basis of social organization, which perpetuates discrimination and oppression.

New paradigms do reproduce old hegemonies and thus there are undoubtedly many mutations to old hegemonies that can keep feminists busy, agitated and as overworked today as in our industrial age preoccupations. The IS paradigm does sit over existing structures of power…..

But while there is no doubt that this emerging public is replete with the very ingredients that make for a feminist political agenda against capitalism, racism, and hegemony of the North, the emerging public is not merely a replica of entrenched institutions and structures but embodies an unformed nebulousness wherein lies the opportunity for feminism to exploit the disruptive potential of ICTs for institutional shifts that are gender equal.

I would like to step aside a bit now and talk about familiar territory; the impasse in grassroots feminist strategies for gender equality

1. a depoliticization that we see of transformative agenda through mainstreaming strategies that have resulted in tokenism and a dilution of critical feminist content
2. a marginalisation of women's empowerment agenda through interventions that place burdens on women without corresponding accountabilities on other actors

The recent study by Nirantar clearly exemplifies this. The study argues how micro-credit is valorized as the solution to poverty in global policy and seen as the route to 'empowerment'; and SHGs are cast in a passive recipient mode at the mercy of the largesse of the state. This model clearly ignores fundamental issues about the larger political economic paradigm. Much of what has passed off as women's empowerment strategies at the community level have thus been no more than an instrumentalisation of women, taking off from social capital theories through which the productive capacities of the poor and of women are sought to be appropriated to subsidise the state's development project.

Obviously, in this depoliticization of gender, the agenda of feminist *struggle* is completely obscured. This is the slate that we start with as we explore feminist strategies in the new age. And my submission is that there are many characteristics of the changes that we are living through, also called the IS paradigm, which can allow women to reclaim transformatory politics.

Digital media are being used by many poor illiterate women from across the country – through community radio and video, engaging in critical agenda setting around community issues and rights, and claiming the public that has historically been denied

to women. Through our project in Mysore, we are exploring how the political content of the collective at the village level can be strengthened and affirmed. In Mahiti Manthana, Mahila Samakhya Karnataka women watch videos that trigger debates, videos that provide basic survival related information, and those that are narratives about women from other sanghas. The video serves as a medium that resonates with their needs, aspirations and questions and weaves multiple sanghas around a collective identity. It creates the space for more contextual localized articulations. It allows for women to meet as members of the community - and not only as beneficiaries of an intervention – to engage with a new knowledge and information discourse, that they shape and use.

Localized digital media can and needs to be a core feminist strategy today – for moving beyond didactic organizing at the community level, into modes that encourage women's collectives along learning and action paradigms that are self-reflective and self-driven. These alternatives for feminist mobilization serve an important way out of the depoliticized, social capital based 'empowerment' projects. They affirm social cohesion among marginalized women, and allow for the dislocation of the private and a gendering of the public in new ways, thus creating new contexts for contestation.

Such examples or counterpublics – publics that begin as subversive spaces but seek to claim the mainstream - are indeed unique to the times we live in, and mark the realigning public sphere.

ICTs also allow for a strong shift in the Information and Communication (I and C) architecture at the community level, in areas beyond the local media space. Telecentres owned and controlled by women in our project we feel hold much promise for women to emerge as new brokers of critical institutional linkages. Where women are central to telecentre processes, as in the case of Dhan Foundation's initiatives, their status is redefined in the new roles they perform as mediators of information, communicating and interacting with external institutions on the behalf of the community. What makes such redefinition possible is that these are new community roles, and are not yet frozen on gendered lines. Herein also lies the possibilities for a redefined citizenship in the ways women can connect with and negotiate their rights with the state thru new infrastructure like telecentres.

The point again is that whether women engage with media processes at the community level that represent their standpoint and serves their agenda, or whether they find spaces as information intermediaries that destabilizes the community's traditional or entrenched communication nodes, the potential for powershift is immense and this is part of the opportunity that the IS opens up.

However, it is obvious that on the road ahead, feminist activism needs to be prepared to address the dominant paradigm. This demands that we recognize and identify how the very same political economic logic that has informed the SHGisation of women's movements has parallels in the IS context. ICTs are often sought to be appended to communities through corporate social responsibility initiatives or enterprise models completely divorced from local struggles for development and rights. And as in the case of SHGs and micro credit, even in the case of ICTs, the macro political economic

questions are unaddressed. Governments do not see the central role for public investments in ICT infrastructure and nor do they see the IS area as a significant policy domain requiring regulation of market players and more importantly a vision based on social justice and equity.

Thus, while telecentres are theoretically new spaces for radical action and social transformation, they may actually be turning out to be no more than the extended tentacles of corporate globalization and easy conduits for markets. Many corporates are lining up to take up crucial nodal roles in the central governments Common Services Centres (CSCs) scheme, and if issues that concern us in such initiatives are left undebated and unaddressed, such schemes can end up as a state subsidization of corporate outreach to rural areas in highly monopolistic and even unequal and exploitative terms.

From a feminist political economy perspective, a weak or colluding state that allies with dominant economic interests, is particularly threatening in the IS context. Times such as these with the promise for upheaval require strong moorings in social policy.

Not only do we see governments in developing countries being bought in by economic interests but they also are truly at a loss to understand the real implication of IS changes. Markets cannot be allowed to lead the IS. A democratic information society architecture - basic connectivity, creation and dissemination of content, ICT-enabled systems in development delivery, etc - require proactive policy responses.

And here we also need to harness our energies to address the larger political economy questions of the IS. Connectivity infrastructure today is a good example. Internet and email traffic of most developing countries passes through the US without any necessary technical precondition. This is wasteful of bandwidth resources, exploitative of the global south because resources are transferred for interconnection costs, and obviously, makes countries vulnerable to political manipulation by the US.

Again, at the community level, wireless is increasingly considered as an appropriate last mile solution for ubiquitous broadband. Wifi allows meshed networks and involves no costs in connecting one user to another. Wifi based models can easily connect communities with communities, villages with villages in such a way that traffic need not go through the equipment of a carrier agency that will seek rent. However the passing of all communication through propriety networks not only serves corporate interests but also of the state since it enables easier surveillance. Our engagement with policy needs to be informed by both the technological possibilities as well as politics, as we shape new agendas for empowerment.

And here while we address state institutions for constructing the policy arena, feminist intuition needs to inform our engagements. The state is congenitally predisposed to centralizing tendencies, and ICT infrastructure can be phenomenally centralizing. While we need to revitalize community level action through the appropriation of ICTs, any demand that we make of the state, must come with an assertion of freedoms and rights.