

Technology, social process and gender in the information society
Workshop Concept Note

Introduction and Rationale

The social impact of paradigmatic breakthroughs in technology often manifests in watershed rearrangements of social structures and institutions. The industrial revolution and industrial societies illustrate how technological shifts in terms of unprecedented mechanical power triggered new possibilities of economic production and hence new social arrangements. Further, these shifts shaped the very nature of power across institutional settings, transforming among other things, gender norms, roles and relationships.

In the context of what has come to be called as the information society, one faces a situation of flux of a similar scale and significance. New ICTs are increasingly redefining social relationships and institutions. And these changes portend major implications for gender relations. Interestingly, the information society context has also thrown up reflections and theoretical conceptions about the nature of the times we live in and the forces that are shaping it, and this provides us with frameworks to influence the contours of the social-scape in directions that we may aspire towards.

Such influencing however, requires not only a clearer grasp and articulation of the nature of the changes but also a political engagement to confront and resist the dominant ideologies and frameworks that seem to be defining the direction of such changes. For feminist inquiry and action, there is a clear agenda – to appropriate and understand the dominant discourse of the information society and critique it from the vantage of gender, and envision an empowering trajectory that addresses issues of power and change from a feminist standpoint.

Many initiatives on the ground that have deployed new ICTs provide insights that signify the potential of these technologies to redefine social relations. These efforts create and embed new information and communication processes, which become new constituents of social relations and have multidimensional impacts on gender and power at the community level.

IT for Change and Luleå University of Technology propose to hold a workshop to look at gender related changes in contextual projects using new ICTs. The workshop titled 'Technology, social process and gender in the information society' will take a systems approach that examines the intersecting grids of social and institutional change, gender transformative processes and techno-social models. These dimensions are central to the emerging field of community informatics, which adopts such a systems view. Theoretical work in this area is still nascent.

The workshop will look at ICT-induced change from different vantages : for example, how interactive features of new technologies change local knowledge paradigms and where gender is situated in this; how access to empowering information and to public services has induced and impacted women's empowerment processes; what the

significance of audio-visual ICTs is for effecting change that is empowering to women; how ICTs can help overcome the structural isolation of women by providing them a new social space that can trigger empowering political processes, and how different ownership and enterprise patterns have gendered impacts. A systems view will imply an integrated view of how all or many of these possibilities for women's empowerment play out in the different contextual models, tending towards lasting shifts in gendered power relationships.

Objectives of the workshop

The workshop will synthesise gender perspectives in relation to contextual ICT-led models of social change.

Specifically, it will look at how:

- New ICTs bring about paradigmatic shifts in the information and communications architecture of local communities and consequently realign social relations
- Shifts in the information and communications architecture of the community pose challenges to and opportunities for women's empowerment
- Emerging ICT models throw up specific pointers for policy and program implementation that can address larger social and developmental priorities, especially the goal of women's empowerment.

Session design

Day 1

Session 1 - Technology, society and gender

The discussions in this session will revisit social assumptions behind technology assimilation with lessons from history on how technology changes have impacted gender relations, and also cover the new context and opportunities in the information society.

Session 2 - Situating Gender in community informatics

This session will explore whether and how the information and communications (I & C) architecture at the community level perpetuates gender inequalities and how new ICTs offer possibilities for structural shifts that impact existing gender relations. The session will examine how the new paradigms of interactivity, low communication costs, information organizing and access, asynchronous communication etc and other digital tools and applications can be used for developing contextual informatics - and how these changes can be directed to impact gender relations in positive ways. The session will analyse techno-social models and how they address women's appropriation of and control over technology.

Session 3 - The Information Society Paradigm - from the local to the global

The session will involve a discussion on policy level issues, build recommendations, and highlight the enabling conditions for influencing gender related outcomes in community

informatics. It will unpack how the enhanced degree of connectedness implicit in the concept of the information society, means an even greater impact of global and national policy environments on local conditions.

Day 2

Session 1 - Presentation of the interactive feminist methodological approach and project level strategies in the SAMI network project.

Session 2 - Presentation of the qualitative research methodology and emerging findings in the Mahiti Manthana project

Session 3 - Open discussion on the gender related concepts and frameworks informing and emerging from ICT project and research designs. The discussions will throw up issues from the experiences of projects discussed in earlier sessions as well as of other such projects.