

**Gender Perspectives on the Information Society
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**CYBERSPACE - BASTION OF FREEDOM OR FREEDOM FROM
RESPONSIBILITY?**

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ABSTRACT

William Gibson, in his path breaking novel *Neuromancer*, coined the term 'cyberspace' which he describes as a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation...A graphic representation of data abstracted from the backs of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity." (Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*, 67).

Of these billions of operators, almost half are women. And, what of the hallucination? What do women imagine is there, and not there? Is it freedom to hallucinate? Sometimes, given that women's reality is so harsh, the virtual reality of cyberspace can be a welcome change.

Does cyberspace offer freedom to women? Does it allow them to think, speak or act without externally imposed restraints; immunity from an obligation or duty? Or is it freedom from responsibility - the social force that binds us to our obligations and the courses of action demanded by that force that "every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation?

The paper will explore how women in South Asia have fared in cyberspace. Has it been a liberating tool for them? Or, has it been a free for all, with responsibility thrown to the winds?

CYBERSPACE - BASTION OF FREEDOM OR FREEDOM FROM RESPONSIBILITY

In 1984, William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer*, a science fiction novel, which was a vision of technological and impersonal life in the twenty-first century.

Gibson, through *Neuromancer*, created the terms "virtual reality" and "cyberspace", terms that today are part of our language. In his book, Gibson describes cyberspace as:

"A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation....a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity."

So what exactly is cyberspace - this unthinkable complexity - in the context of today's discussion? I think we are talking about the use/abuse, pro/cons, etc of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) including Internet, which provide people a whole host of tools to carry out personal, social, business, political and many other types of activities and transactions.

At the outset I must confess that I had some trouble with the subject of this paper I was assigned - Cyberspace: Bastion of Freedom or Freedom from Responsibility. The more I delved into the subject, and the more I thought about it, I began to feel that freedom and responsibility - as metaphors for issues of cyberspace - were inadequate and perhaps too restrictive and simplistic. Freedom and responsibility are attractive metaphors but perhaps more mundane language will help us think this through more fruitfully.

ICTs can do - and are doing - a lot for and to women. It would be dangerous to simplify this. We would lower our guard by overstating the good part and lose out an unprecedented opportunity by concentrating only on the abuse. Only a deliberate, specific discussion and debate will help us to get the full picture.

I began to focus on the various facets of the topic, and the issues that have been of concern to women regarding communications, technologies and gender, and the movements around these in the last couple of decades. What lessons has the women's movement learned during this time? And can this learning be extended to the use of ICTs?

In this paper I will suggest that communication technologies be viewed as a tool, not only for interacting with each other, but for interacting with the world around us - as a tool of empowerment. Empowerment means that people have access to information about choices available to them, and the means to exercise these choices.

In South Asia the dominant ideologies of patriarchy, feudalism, casteism, elitism, communalism, sexism, and others - work in permutations and combinations as obstacles for women to have access to information.

While information alone will not change women's lives, it is a beginning. Information leads to analysis, articulation, understanding, options for change, and finally to change.

Since the advent of Internet and related communication tools, women in South Asia have been able to access knowledge and services, build networks, and organise. The very fact that participants at this meeting come from various countries in the South Asian region is a tribute to organising on the Net. From issuing invitations, to receiving abstracts of papers, papers, to travel arrangements – it's all easier because of the Internet.

Almost everyone in this room has benefited in some way or another by engaging with cyberspace.

ICTs as opportunity

As a tool, the Internet has opened up the world of information and communication for women. It has:

Offered an opportunity to transcend boundaries. Boundaries of self, family, community, and nation. It enables us to step out of ourselves in ways that we could never imagine.

Brought freedom – admittedly in the more mundane sense of the word – and privacy to the lives of women.

Encouraged the economic empowerment of women, and reduced their dependence on others.

Enabled a wider circulation of the theory and practice of women organising in the last several decades.

Enabled a truly cross sectional, cross-country, cross-regional and international communication between women.

ICTs have enabled women to transcend boundaries. Zubair Faisal Abbasi in *Chatting: (Inter) Faces of Self* writes:

“Comfortable with gliding from one window to another, most of the time she keeps herself busy in punching keyboard buttons of her PC. She looks down on the keyboard and to the screen in quick succession, uses Tab+Alt to shift from one opening to another and pours out the text and graphics into them; expressions change on her face in reaction to what happens in virtual reality. Neither tired, nor bored. Ofcourse, Ms. Bushra is simultaneously and alternately on MIRC, ICQ and Yahoo Chat rooms, on AOL online messengers and on doing official work on the spreadsheet as well.”

Abbasi describes Bushra as a 21 year-old who works in an office, displays sober behaviour typical of middle class women in Pakistan, wears a shelwar kameeze, and a corporate smile on her face. This is her offline

identity. Online, no one really knows who she is or where she is physically located. Cyber pals know her through the characters she creatively churns out within moments on different chat channels and from the text she enters into the bulletin boards. In virtual existence with online cyberspace, she is not always a girl. She does gender swapping, changes her profession, and sometimes behaves like “an angry young man”.

Bushra is comfortable “cycling through” her multiple identities and claims that the characters generated through the use of language are often the extensions of the hidden portions of herself. She considers herself articulate in managing her multiple selves working in parallel without any damage to her “collective-real self”. According to Abbasi, the communications revolution, in several contexts, has given rise to interfaces where textual actions, multiple identities and cathartic confessions will be done in Internet relay chats and on bulletin boards, etc, with privacy and freedom.

For most South Asian women, privacy and freedom are hard to come by. Raised in environments that by and large are confining, cyberspace provides women an opportunity to inhabit another world - a world where they are not judged by their looks, the colour of their skin, or their ability to conform.

ICTs have broken down gender boundaries. Traditionally men have had greater access to technology, and communication technologies are no different. But the greater availability of these technologies and the recognition that they could empower women has meant that women now have greater access to them. While literacy levels and technical knowledge of how to operate these technologies may be somewhat lacking, women are fast working themselves around this drawback. Grameen Phone in Bangladesh and SEWA in India are some examples of this. Development organisations that have gender on their agenda have also created incentives to include women. One example of this is the Village Knowledge Centres of the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) in Chennai.

ICTs have provided jobs for women. Through assembly line work as well as Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) women can access jobs, gain experience, and make money – all which increases their bargaining power in and outside their homes. Economic empowerment for women in all classes is an essential first step for self-esteem and self-worth. However, there is no guarantee that women will be free from violence or discrimination, just because they have economic power. But, it is a beginning.

ICTs are also changing the nature of the workplace. Not only are they providing jobs, but they are offering a work culture and ethic that reduces dependency - of women on men, of poor on the rich, of young on the old. Working alone or working in teams, young South Asians are getting a work exposure they never had before. Issues of discipline, accountability, promptness and responsibility come with the territory of the ICT industry.

ICTs have provided women in South Asia access to national, regional and international networks. The ability to communicate without being face-to-face has allowed for a kind of coming together and organising and networking which has benefited them enormously. From the smallest to the largest networks, women groups, networks and organisations have been able to impact policies and practices of social change.

The women's movement in South Asia – collectively in the region and in the various countries – has fought hard over the last few decades to bring about change for women and society. These interventions have been at various levels – macro, meso and micro, and advocacy and change has been seen in issues related to women's economic, political and social empowerment. The change that has come out has been a direct outcome of raising consciousness at all levels, making pro-active proposals for change and connecting to other networks and movements for change.

ICTs as threat

In some ways, tools that empower women are also tools of empowerment for others – whose agendas are different. Individuals and organisations that exploit and abuse the vulnerable do so – on and off the Internet. In any interactive technology, there is competition for ideas, values, products and services. Despite innovations and regulation, it is difficult to police the web and women's experiences on the Net are not those different to those at home, in the streets, and in the workspace.

As more women access the Internet, and as their purchasing power increases, more products and services are targeted to them. The most contentious of these is on-line pornography. It is next to impossible to subscribe to a service or do a web search without offensive material appearing on the computer screen. Consumer products can be ignored or rejected, but sexually explicit material is more difficult to handle.

Sexually explicit information and services once had to be sourced if someone wanted it. This is easier to come by via the Internet. But, there is an important difference between pornography and information on sex and sexuality. Studies among young adults in India (and I suspect this is true for other South Asian countries) have shown that young people get information about sexuality from pornography (written and AV). But information that is non-clinical and one that promotes healthy sexuality is harder to come by. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no research or meaningful discussion about this in the South Asian context.

Technologies such as Internet, SMS, and MMS create an environment in which freedom and lack of it exist side by side. In the latter half of 2004, a boy and girl student in a Delhi school were suspended, because the boy had circulated a MMS clip of them engaged in oral sex. The media had a field day and for several weeks there were heated debates on TV and print media about whom was to blame. The school said the incident took place outside its premises. The head girl of the school sent a letter to a national newspaper denouncing the act of the two students in question. Parents, teachers, counselors, psychologists – all expressed outrage at the

situation. Each blamed the other. No one asked what was happening to the two students in question. Many schools, in and outside Delhi, responded by banning mobile phones in schools.

The reality is adults and young adults alike are hooked on to communication technologies. If something is banned, chances are that some misuse will be curbed, but the problem will not go away. The issue is that if there were an environment in which an open discussion on sexuality was permitted, this may not have happened. And even this incident was not sufficient to open the way for this. The discussion about including sex education (in a non-clinical way) is still at a naïve stage in India and South Asian school systems. So much so, the subject is called, “life skills education.”

ICTs have given the sex industry a major platform for marketing their products and services. Various gadgets such as cameras that peep into private spaces in homes (used by landlords in some Indian cities), to innocent pictures that can be then doctored and circulated by the web and phone. Young women have been blackmailed. And, there is promotion of sexual malpractice such as pedophilia and sexual violence.

There are cases of Spam (unsolicited mail), Phishing (mail pretending to be from someone they are not) viruses, and fraud (offers, purportedly, from families of African dictators, etc).

All these can simply be a nuisance or cause trauma and sometimes physical harm to women. Without knowing or understanding the full implication, very often people become victims of these services and products. And, women perhaps could be even more vulnerable to these.

Pro-active in Cyberspace

If Cyberspace is just a space in which people interact, how responsible can it be? Who is responsible for it being responsible? And, if rules are needed, who makes these? And, how do we as women play a pro-active role in this?

These are issues that are still under discussion and debate. Countries and international agencies have created and are in the process of creating legislation, developing Net etiquette, and systems to stop and discourage anti-social behaviour on the Net. In some countries individuals have been punished for circulating offensive images on mobile phones or posting offensive content on the Internet.

And, the more ICTs simplify, the more they make complex. For example, given the vast amounts of information that can be accessed on the Internet, how can we assure the authenticity of this information? Who can validate it and how?

When there is conflict of interest, regulation becomes important and also requires to be sophisticated. For example, broadband service providers are interested in increased traffic – that is quantity – and therefore

probably no incentive in quality or in worrying whether the material is harmful or abuse. Or a government getting huge license fees may have less incentive to curb harmful players.

In regulation, there is a need to understand who the players are and what their interests may be, and then seek effective means of regulating this. In this care is needed as a perennial enemy of women has been the moral brigade. We would not want a situation where a tool of empowerment becomes one of dis-empowerment.

I hope I have demonstrated that ICTs provide an unprecedented opportunity to and for women - to participate as clients and customers in the virtual and non-virtual marketplace. And in this, women need to play a much greater pro-active role than they have. If the goal is to ensure that ICTs enhance a certain quality of life, what is this life and how do women go about making this happen?

For the purposes of the discussion we could say that ICTs would enable a quality of life in which communications are authentic, civil, kind, and beyond sexism, racism, communalism, and other regressive tendencies. And, they encourage interactions between people and the outside world that are positive, healthy, and life enhancing.

To make this happen a mixture of approaches are required - research, discussion, debate, advocacy, collective action, legislation, and maybe even boycott. And, incentives and awards to sites promoting information pertaining to issues, which matter to women and for products, and services that enhance a certain quality of life for people. This is one side of the spectrum.

On the other side, being pro-active also means creating content and sites which people will find attractive to go to and use, and initiating discussions and sites on the subjects we are interested in.

"In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual everything depends on the development of the consciousness," said Carl Jung. In a way, this is the task for people concerned about freedom and responsibility in cyberspace.

The task also calls for creating a consciousness - among adult and young women and men - about the nature of Internet. This means its strengths and weaknesses, its potential and pitfalls.

It means advocating that each of us start with our selves and in our homes, by beginning a dialogue within our families about the etiquette in communications, and a commitment to norms and practices that are respectful of each others spaces.

In terms of advocacy - a major goal of this meeting - it means being targeted, focused, and deliberate. It means resisting the temptation to have a laundry list of issues.

The Internet is uniquely situated to educate, delight, inform, and persuade. Whether the Internet grows in an atmosphere of freedom and responsibility - or is stifled by regulation or acrimony - depends on the imagination and hard work of those that care about the unimaginable complexity that William Gibson wrote about.

In conclusion I would like to re-iterate that this unthinkable complexity takes us beyond the realm of freedom and responsibility, beyond good and bad, right and wrong, black or white. It offers us a challenge to look beyond the obvious - to keep the opportunity and threat of the Internet in balance. And, it is this consciousness we need to strive towards and embrace, if we are to understand the true meaning of cyberspace.