

**Gender Perspectives on the Information  
Society**  
**South Asia Pre-WSIS Seminar 2005**

**18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> April**  
**Bangalore**

**WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS  
TECHNOLOGIES**

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supported by UNIFEM and UNDP-APDIP

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## **WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES**

The information and power dialectic is stronger today than any time in history. The possession, control, availability and skills involved in the Information and Communication Technologies [ICT] make us into 'information societies'. Information flows have a strategic aspect that has changed the notions of war, peace and life itself. The question this paper raises is how has this technology improved and structurally changed the lives of the subalterns and marginalized and specifically women? This question is raised with two motivations. 1] How can the women's movement and peoples' movement use ICT to challenge given unequal structures? 2] Is this change possible and how?

### **The Nature of the Information Society**

The research and control of communication systems based on military oriented space projects was the base for rivalry between the super powers through the Cold War. With the Soviet collapse, the ability of the United States and its allies gained advantage and strategic control over modern communication technologies. For example INTELSAT provides a system on which about a quarter of the communication traffic either originates or terminates in the United States, a system consisting of billions of dollars worth of satellites manufactured by US firms and a system that provides homes and businesses across America with inexpensive and efficient access to virtually every place on earth.<sup>i</sup> Though the privatization of international satellite systems was opposed by many in the Third world, since this would serve the interest of the powerful nations, yet the privatization and commercialization of the communication satellite systems was complete by the mid 1990's.

The internet, which is accessible to any one in the world who has access to a modem and computer, seems like a universally usable device. In reality however it has generated contradictions and is a double edged sword. Use of the ICT is clearly biased in favour of the Western countries and the elite in the Developing countries as tables I and II show.

Table I

Countries with Highest six Internet users

Country	Internet Penetration	% users of the world
United States	67.8 %	22.6 %
China	7.3 %	10.6 %
Japan	52.8 %	7.6 %
Germany	56.0 %	5.2 %
India	3.6 %	4.4 %
United Kingdom	58.7 %	4.0 %

Table II

World Internet Users

World Regions	% Internet Penetration	% World users
Africa	1.5 %	1.5 %
Asia	8.4 %	34.0 %
Europe	35.5 %	29.2 %
Middle East	7.5 %	2.2 %
North America	67.4 %	24.9 %
Latin America/ Caribbean	10.3 %	6.3 %
Oceania/ Australia	48.6 %	1.8 %
<b>WORLD TOTAL</b>	<b>13.9 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>

The ICTs have re-enforced the material and structural inequities of the world further into inequities of information and knowledge. This lop sided growth is due to the structure of ownership of the ICTs. The laws on patents and intellectual property rights are further legalize these inequalities. Studies have showed that more than 80% of all users are computer literate, middle class males under the age of 40. So while access may be unlimited, yet it is restricted by economic class, education, gender, age and race. ICTs thus incorporate these biases.

The second belief about the ICTs also has similar contradictions: Any one is free to post information on the internet. Indeed there are millions of websites. It is thus possible to challenge the corporate press or government propaganda. In reality however, the main information providers remain governments, corporations and academic institutions. In a global system where ICTs are central to economies, these have major implications for not only the economy but the entire social and cultural systems. Information systems have the capacity of operating and manipulating minds and markets. In fact to sustain the market it is increasingly necessary to control and organize information in a way that would influence social, cultural and economic ideas that sustain

and promote the hegemonic global system. For example a study of the US Department of Commerce on globalization stated that modern technologies are “powerful agent[s] for political and social change.”<sup>ii</sup> And when there is an increasing concentration of ICTs in the hands of a few, it is possible to reproduce hegemonic ideas across national boundaries.

Hegemonic ideas focus on the reproduction of gender stereotypes. The emphasis in Western and even Asian cultures, for women to be slim, fair, proportionate in looks and demure, acceptable, virtuous in character is type cast in advertisements in ICTs. Companies that make inter-active on line games or those who control on line chat groups, cybersex etc draw on these stereotypes. For example they work on the assumption that men are more likely to visit sites and play those interactive games that focus upon male power and dominance and where hierarchy and respect is based on recognition of rank and status.<sup>iii</sup> Women on the other hand sought out support, acceptance and comfort through on-line sites.

In these circumstances, how can the women’s movement use this complex system for their advantage? I would argue that ICTs are a valuable resource and that women are not using it sufficiently. There is much scope for developing a pro-women’s equity discourse through the ICTs. The very instrument that is dominated and controlled by masculinist ideologies and structures can also be subverted through alternative net communities. Even in many of the developing countries, like India, almost 30% of workers in the ICTs are women. This indicates that women are getting closer to accessing ICTs and especially internet communications. While we are flooded with the stereo-typed information, alternate notions of power, that challenge the given nature of masculinist power can be challenged through the net.

A not so pleasant example of subversion of nation-state ideas comes from the anti-state movements. These range from the pro-democracy movements in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine, to anti- state movements in Chechnya, North Ireland, Kashmir, etc. All of have assisted mass movements and challenged the strongest of states. Women’s groups can do much more.

<sup>i</sup> Statement of R. Colino, director of INTELSAT, before the Senate foreign relations Committee, October 19, 1983, quoted in Hamid Mowlana, Global Information and World Communication, Sage, New Delhi, 1997, p13.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> [www.netaddiction.com](http://www.netaddiction.com)