

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

**18th – 19th April
Bangalore**

WOMEN, MEDIA AND ICTs IN UN POLITICS: PROGRESS OR BACKLASH?

Heike Jensen

Boell Foundation, Germany

**IT for Change
with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
and Centre for Public Policy, Indian Institute of Management
- Bangalore**

supported by UNIFEM and UNDP-APDIP

*Gender Perspectives on the Information Society – South Asia Pre-WSIS
Seminar 2005
IT for Change*



ABSTRACT

From the first World Conferences on Women onwards, media issues have received attention at the level of the UN. The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) in addition put ICTs on the global political agenda. The most recent UN processes in which women, media and ICTs have been tackled are the 10-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, Geneva 2003, Tunis 2005).

Given the decades of engagement with media and ICT issues at the global level, it might be presumed that women are now well positioned to negotiate and shape the Information Society, which is said to dawn on all of us. Yet a closer look at current evaluations and political deliberations suggests that rather the opposite is the case: Not even the long fought-for media issues have been resolved; there is a weariness in many women's movements to keep these issues squarely on the agenda; and new challenges and threats associated with media businesses and ICTs have hardly registered with the broader movements at all.

In my presentation, I will take a closer look at these challenges and threats, particularly as they have become apparent in the WSIS process. Taking into account the historical dimension, I will reflect on how the challenges and threats relate to the marginalization and discursive framing of women's political demands at the level of the UN, and I will also offer an assessment of the utility of feminist strategies and concepts vis-a-vis these challenges and threats. This assessment is meant to open a debate of how women and men might best engage with media and ICT issues to direct developments in the directions of gender equality, non-discrimination and sustainability.

WOMEN, MEDIA AND ICTs IN UN POLITICS: PROGRESS OR BACKLASH?

For decades, media issues have been on the agenda of many women's movements around the world. These movements have developed **media strategies**, they have come up with **media policy demands**, and they have inspired and utilized **media research**. All of these initiatives have impacted the local level, the national and regional levels, and, since the inauguration of the series of UN World Conferences on Women, also the global level.

In my talk, I would like to give you a brief history about the most important media issues that have been raised in the context of UN conferences and summits. I think that this historical backdrop is helpful when we want to assess where we stand right now, as the process surrounding the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has been underway for about three years. I will argue that instead of seeing a slow but steady progress with respect to achieving feminist media aims, there have been crucial failures and a general backlash against women's human rights in this area. Furthermore, feminist media interventions do not appear to be undertaken by the mainstream of women's movements any more, but seem marginal. This is the case despite the numerous individuals and organizations around the world that are extremely dedicated to and focused on these issues, as many of those present here can no doubt attest to. And it is the case despite the fact that new media and ICT developments have had a crucial bearing on women's lives and consequently need to be addressed from a feminist point of view.

So, what are the traditional feminist concerns with respect to media? Long-standing aims, which have been articulated over and over again, are the following ones:

Concerning **media content**:

- to get rid of stereotyped depictions of men and women and of pornography,
- to have positive, diverse and plentiful portrayals of women,
- to have a broad dissemination of information about women's rights,
- and to have a general orientation of the media towards values such as peace, respect and non-discrimination.

Concerning **infrastructure**:

- to develop communications and information networks that benefit women.

And concerning **education, training and career development:**

- to train more women in the mass communication sector and to bring them into decision-making positions in the respective business and governmental institutions.

To give you an idea of how media issues were addressed 20 years ago on the UN level, I would like to quote a paragraph from the "Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women". These Strategies were adopted by the World Conference on women in Kenya in 1985, which was held to "review and appraise the achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace". This decade lasted from 1975 to 1985, and the paragraph I will quote concerns itself with "Current trends and perspectives to the year 2000". It states,

"It is expected that the ever-expanding communications network will be better attuned than before to the concerns of women and that planners in this field will provide increasing information on the objectives of the Decade – equality, development and peace – on the Forward-looking Strategies, and on the issues included in the subtheme – employment, health and education. All channels, including computers, formal and non-formal education and the media, as well as traditional mechanisms of communication involving the cultural media of ritual, drama, dialogue, oral literature and music, should be used." (para. 30)

I think this paragraph is noteworthy for several reasons: It is **visionary** in that it foresees the growing importance of communication networks and computers. It is **positive** in that it assumes that women's concerns and values will be transmitted broadly. And it is **inclusive** in its appeal to a large variety of mechanisms of communication.

Ten years later, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, among the 12 Critical Areas of Concern that were addressed was one called:

"Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media".

Section J of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action addressed "Women and the Media" in detail. It stated that women increasingly worked in the communications sector, but that their number in decision-making positions in this sector and in the corresponding media policy sectors was still small. Also, the persistence of negative and degrading images of women in the media was pointed out. Given the lack of progress in these matters, what remained was to point to the **possibilities** of the

media, and particularly ICTs, without predicting any **probability** of success for women, as in the following sentence:

"Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women." (para. 234)

I want to draw attention to two other aspects of the Beijing document that set it apart from earlier ones:

One is the recurring emphasis on **freedom of expression**. Now, at first glance, references to freedom of expression in a document about women's rights might seem like a good thing. After all, what women are fighting for is freedom of expression through the media. But in this document, as in the political landscape more broadly and for decades, freedom of expression refers to the media businesses' freedom from state interference with their content and employment structures. Freedom of expression, from a women's rights point of view, becomes a tricky concept in this form of usage. On the one hand, it is obvious that women are hardly the winners when media are state-controlled and serve as mouth-pieces of the state. On the other hand, women also lose out when freedom of expression through the media is only enjoyed by those who own media, not many of who are women.

There are, of course, middle roads between the options of total state control and total business control of the media sector. These have for instance taken the shape of public service obligations and multi-stakeholder regulatory bodies, such as we have in Germany. Yet even these have not profited women to a significant extent, because women are just seen as one homogeneous and marginal interest group among many. A forceful testimony to the continued stereotyping and marginalization of women in the media around the world is provided by the Global Media Monitoring Project, which regularly compares the prominent news coverage on women and men in many parts of the world. Statistics about women in leadership positions in media and in media politics complement this sad picture.

An added dimension to the "freedom of expression" dilemma is its geopolitical implication. Freedom of expression is particularly dear to the heart of media and entertainment companies from the global north, especially the US, that wish to export their products and formats and penetrate foreign markets with them. The questions if and how countries and regions can protect themselves from what might be conceived as cultural imperialism and how they can safeguard their cultural and linguistic diversity has been hotly debated for at least 30 years,

particularly within UNESCO. These questions also enter into GATS and TRIPS negotiations.

The uni-directional spread of content and formats also means that the global south has few chances to portray itself on its own terms to the global north, so that northern stereotypes about the south can hardly be challenged broadly in the north. Not surprisingly, this state of affairs can and does also impact international politics including development cooperation. The specific ramifications for women are well-known and have manifested in a series of development approaches, from Women in Development (WID) to Women and Development (WAD) to Gender and Development (GAD). The current bottom line seems to be that the neo-liberal approach to economic policy, which has dominated development cooperation between north and south for many years and which is now also increasingly taking its toll in the northern region, is a framework that is not suited to achieve broader redistributions of wealth and sustainable development. Hence to make this approach gender-sensitive seems like a lost and possibly even dangerous cause. I will come back to this issue when I address the current UN World Summit on the Information Society.

To get back to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, another aspect that is worth pointing out is that much weight is put on the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (para. 33). Section J acknowledges that ICTs can serve as alternative sources of information, to facilitate networking, to challenge derogatory stereotypes and instances of abuse of power by the media industry, to strengthen women's participation in democratic processes and to promote international, south-south and south-north cooperation, if women get a say in how ICTs develop. On the one hand, ICTs hence appear as a possible remedy for the drawbacks of the established media, which had proved quite resistant to feminist politics up until that point. And ICTs are also seen as offering additional opportunities that go beyond what the established media could do for women and women's rights, especially regarding the global dissemination of information and global networking. On the other hand, evidence is cited that ICT content and employment structures had fallen in line with the stereotypes and restrictions familiar from the other media businesses. Furthermore, digital divides between south and north as well as between women and men are pointed out as specific challenges (Outcome Document para. J.29).

In the wake of the Beijing Conference, gender-sensitive ICT projects and policy issues gained in importance at the UN level. In terms of projects, I would like to mention **WomenWatch**. WomenWatch is a web site that was

established in 1997 to support the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. It describes itself as "a central gateway to information and resources on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the United Nations system" (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/about/>). It combines several Beijing mandates such as the use of ICTs for information dissemination, the mainstreaming of women's issues throughout the UN and the linking of efforts within the UN. WomenWatch also collaborated with the NGO web site Women Action 2000 to strengthen information dissemination through internet as well as traditional means of communication in the regions (Report of the Secretary-General From Beijing to Beijing+5. NY: UN, 2001: 239).

In terms of ICT issues, it is vital to point out that gender advocacy in **ICT policy** became a new field of feminist intervention. On the international plane, it was inaugurated in the context of the World Telecommunications Development Conference organized by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in Malta in 1998. In its wake, ITU established a Gender Task Force. Thus right before the beginning of the new millennium, feminists had begun to politicize the very infrastructure and politico-economic framework of ICTs within the UN, and public platforms were in place to disseminate the relevant information broadly. Given that information and the appropriate structures to disseminate it is the key to dialogue and peaceful social change, it seemed that women were well-poised to make their concerns heard, to network and to impact societies.

Then in the year 2000 came the five-year "Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action". It was found that WomenWatch was one of the UN web sites that was highest in demand, with approximately 10,000 hits per month (Report of the Secretary-General From Beijing to Beijing+5. NY: UN, 2001: 196) But the overall verdict concerning media and ICTs was this:

"Media, globally, is virtually unregulated in terms of promoting balanced and non-stereotyped portrayals of women. Governments do not seem to exert meaningful control or influence in respect of the promotion of equality, or the eradication of stereotypes, violence against women, pornography and other degrading images. Still more must be done in the area of information and media to promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programmes. There is the need for the development of information policies and strategies with clear gender-sensitive approaches." (ibid., 201)

"[W]omen have been slow to enter ICTs-based professions worldwide and have been largely excluded from designing and shaping information technologies. Where women are employed in this sector, they tend to hold low-paying and less prestigious positions. Traditionally, gender differences and disparities have been ignored in policies and programmes dealing with the development and dissemination of improved technologies. As a result, women have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances. Women, therefore, need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies. Otherwise, the information revolution might bypass women or produce adverse effects on their lives." (ibid., 294)

So the stakes were clear when the negotiation process of the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) started in earnest in the year 2002. Until December 2003, when the first summit event took place in Geneva, two feminist lobbying groups worked tirelessly to get women's concerns on the WSIS agenda: the WSIS Gender Caucus as a multi-stakeholder group made up of representatives from governments, international agencies, business, and civil society, and the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group as a civil society entity. Their work could draw on substantial backing within the United Nations women's machinery, from Expert Group Meetings called by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), to briefing notes prepared by the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, to recommendations issued to WSIS by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

One basic commitment to women's human rights, empowerment and key participation in shaping the so-called Information Society was achieved after a long struggle in the shape of paragraph 12 of the WSIS Declaration of Principles of Geneva. But the principle of gender mainstreaming was not applied in the overall process, which means that the negotiations were characterized by the usual gender-blind and hence male-centered approach that did not care to look too closely into what kinds of groups of men and women would be affected in which ways by the outcomes of the negotiations. If gender was addressed, it was with regard to specific support actions for girls and women. Here, two traditional areas of feminist interventions are expressly reflected:

1. **content:** to achieve balanced and diverse portrayals of women and men and
2. **education, training and career development** with respect to ICTs.

Also, the need to monitor the developments and to devise gender-sensitive indicators has been acknowledged. What is most glaringly absent are explicit commitments to gender-sensitive **infrastructure** development, the issue that has been at the core of the more recent feminist ICT policy interventions. Also, there are no references to the promotion of communications and information networks that benefit women or of content transmitting values such as women's rights, peace, respect and non-discrimination, which have constituted traditional media and ICT concerns. These omissions are even true with respect to the comparatively new field of e-democracy and its potential.

At bottom, while the feminist consensus has been that ICTs can have the effect of minimizing and overcoming social divides and injustices, if they are **designed, implemented** and **monitored** to do so, WSIS arguably does not lay the foundations for these developments. Far-reaching, structural transformations would be required to achieve these goals, and this is where WSIS has failed. Most centrally, and up until this very point in the negotiations, the neoliberal economic policy paradigm could not be successfully challenged. Left to market forces, however, ICTs tend to deepen existing social divides and injustices, most importantly south-north divides and divides between men and women, but also divides among women themselves.

But in this context, we need to realize that ICTs don't just constitute one media business among many that has been regulated according to the neoliberal economic policy paradigm and generates its impact within it. The ICT sector is in fact the enabler and the motor of global neoliberal economics, because ICTs allow the split-second coordination of production, distribution and consumption patterns as well as of financial markets around the globe. As such, it does not really make sense to address ICTs solely as information and entertainment media in the classical sense. This is where feminist analyses and interventions need to depart from more traditional approaches and break new grounds.

A true dilemma for feminist politics arises because they often does not **prioritize** the same issues as mainstream politics or because of the necessity to contextualize these **issues** differently. Mainstream politics still by and large addresses abstract issues without making explicit the human constituencies and their stakes in these issues. Feminist politics invariably start from specific female constituencies and their needs. Since women have not been able to set the overall political **agenda**, they have consequently appeared to be centrally concerned with fringe concerns. Due to the need to provide very basic social analyses, the "hot" WSIS

issues of internet governance, surveillance, free and open software versus proprietary software, and intellectual property rights versus knowledge commons and the public domain, have not been the issues uppermost on the feminist agenda. This is not to say that these issues do not have decisive ramifications for women and that these have not been voiced.

While it might have been expected that in a non-gender-sensitive context such as WSIS, very basic women's lobbying would be called for, what is really astonishing and worrying is that in the women-centered political context of the Beijing+10 review at the UN, media and ICT issues were marginalized or disregarded altogether, both by governments and NGOs. We need to pay more, not less attention to the crucial developments in the media and ICT sector, and we need to come up with more adequate approaches, frameworks and demands, reflecting the new qualities and status of media and ICTs in the so-called Information Society. Last but not least, we need to employ gender as a **relational construct** involving men and women, so that women no longer appear as a separate fringe group with special needs – an afterthought to the real business at hand.