Rationale and Background

Shaping a Feminist Discourse around the WSIS agenda
Information technologies have pervaded the way in which many of us connect with our work and our world. Furthermore, the impact of technology manifest in IT-powered globalisation, the telecom revolution, the advent of e-governance and the wide use of networking tools for grassroots advocacy, is being increasingly felt by growing numbers of women. The range of issues linked to new technologies, with implications for development practice, political economy analyses and social justice, underscore the need for feminist engagement on the information society discourse.

The second and final phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is to be held in November 2005 in Tunisia. From Southern and feminist perspectives, the first phase held in Geneva in December 2003 left a lot to be desired: the participation of civil society from the South was negligible, and the official conference paid lip service to developing country concerns on intellectual property, financing and technology transfer, and to a range of feminist concerns about the right to information and communication, the ownership of knowledge, the participation of women in the information technology arena, and access of the poorest women to gains from new technologies.

Even though considerable scholarship on gender and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) exists today, the domain is lacking particularly in the involvement of feminists from South Asia. The engagement of feminists from the region is indeed an imperative, both for building a theoretical discourse located in the context and for active global advocacy based on regional priorities. Phase 2 of the WSIS provides an opportunity to take feminist concerns from South Asia in respect of the architecture of the information society, to a global forum that will make crucial decisions with implications for women of the South. The seminar was organized to address this critical need.

This Seminar aims to work for a deeper involvement of feminist thought in the WSIS agenda. ITfC would like to build into the discussions around the WSIS agenda informed perspectives on social change, diversity, ethics, political economy, and democratic and sustainable alternatives to current paradigms of the new economy. We would therefore like to bring feminist thinkers, activists, organisations, writers and women in media in the South Asia region together in a dialogue in a seminar that will not only consolidate frameworks of analysis but also serve as a trigger for informed advocacy in the region around ICTs and gender. This seminar is being supported by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

The WSIS at Geneva marked an important milestone in the global processes in recent years to address the information and communication needs and rights of communities. The diffusion of new media and technologies has shaped and redefined economic, political and interpersonal domains, with far reaching impacts on work organization, knowledge production and distribution, personal communication and networking. Inextricably connected to the ways in which the information parameters of global economy and society have undergone transformation is the discourse of the digital divide. The concept of digital divide captures the imperative to address the needs of communities whose historical and social location impedes their access to information, undermines their capacities to protect and use knowledge that they have traditionally owned, and exacerbates their marginalisation. The divide between the connected and the unconnected in fact signifies a critical dimension to understanding power and social control.