

# Saying No to a Hand-me-down Information Society

## The Digital Gap, Gender and Development

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*It is not by chance that almost 60 years after the creation of the GATT/WTO system the term 'Development' appeared for the first time in the title of a Round. This Round is not only about trade, even in the broader meaning the word has acquired in the last decades. It is, above all, about development, which means: creating conditions that allow the world's poorest populations to enjoy the progress of our times, which was often achieved at their expense.*

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil<sup>2</sup>

The place of development in global geopolitics is in itself a product of historical struggle. Legitimized in the right to development discourse, these conditions for self-determination and freedom from deprivation for the world's majority have in reality been wrested over many battles.

The recent collapse of the Doha round of the WTO signifies a sudden but not surprising stalemate for the global trade juggernaut. It is clear that global policy regimes have to account for the right to development, of the rights of all countries and peoples to have choices to define their path to the future. The collapse is also a sign of the oscillating balance between the political and the economic powers that be, and a reminder that *our* politics, as in progressive politics, needs to keep pace with the rapidly shifting axes of global geo-politics and global capitalism.

Unpacking the politics around the development dimensions of what has come to be known as the information society (IS) is undeniably one of the most significant agenda for global rights activism today. And articulations of gender equality in the information society must proceed from their embeddedness in information society politics, as much as they derive from specific contexts of women's oppression. **The notion of the 'digital gap' needs to be placed squarely within the larger picture – of how the information society is being shaped by global forces. And any feminist response in this context needs to be completely cognizant of this larger picture.**

### ***Part 1- The Dominant IS Discourse***

#### **Making Meaning of the Internet**

Despite encompassing a range of technologies, at the very basic level, the digital era, is symbolized by the prowess of the Internet, and signifies a paradigm shift in communication and information processes. The Internet is not just a technology; it is a technological paradigm. It is a powerful system from which most techno-social innovations in the IS arise. As a paradigm, it has the capability to subsume other information and communications technologies (ICTs) with which it often gets compared, from telephony, to radio and television. In all respects therefore, the Internet sets the context of the IS.

Internet enthusiasts have celebrated the democratic character of the Internet as a platform and space that has enabled information and knowledge sharing, bottom-up and peer to peer communication, giving the possibility of a voice to the excluded. However, critiques of the Internet point to how the network is reconstituting social relations – privileging some, and excluding most. Yet, these critiques often don't go as far as unpacking the ideologies and the structural basis of exclusion. The Internet is changing the context of the world we live in. It is fuelling the consolidation of market-led globalization and thus directly exacerbating income inequalities; it is redefining capital-labour relations, strengthening the expansion of global capital and markets within a context of increasing marginalization and impoverishment of small producers; it is catapulting the control of global cartels in flesh trade, and thus concerns directly our struggles against trafficking. **Thus, the virtual is not just a new site of struggle or a system of discrimination but in fact a new animal, that strengthens and unleashes old ideologies of exploitation; it is anti-poor, anti-south, racist and patriarchal. In this sense, the virtual is much more real than we think. And the 'digital**

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<sup>2</sup> in the meeting between G8 countries and heads of state and governments of Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Republic of Congo and South Africa in Saint-Petersburg on 17th July, just before the Doha round of the WTO was suspended.

**gap', as we know and understand, does not capture these structural aspects adequately.**

The Internet constitutes one of the clearest examples of the social construction of technology. What was an experimental communication platform, 'governed' by the public spirited values of its inventors – openness, egalitarianism and sharing - has since mutated into a platform oriented, first and foremost, to national and global commerce - an electronic marketplace, owing to the manner in which governance mechanisms were set up by the US to serve this objective. The anchorage of many present IG mechanisms in the Department of Commerce of the US government, is just one of the more obvious indicators of this fact. Not only have commercial interests been established as the basis for Internet governance mechanisms, the latter also take their cue from the dominant view of the US establishment – both political and business - about what the political principles for an ideal market and commerce should be<sup>3</sup>. **Thus at its core, the Internet embodies the alliance of mutual convenience between hegemonic global politics and global capitalism.**

### **Unpacking the 'Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICTD)' Phenomenon**

The primarily market oriented character of the Internet, and the ICT phenomenon, in general, has gone a long way in impacting the development dimensions of the information society.

At a macro level, "the national ICT policies and strategies of most developing countries follow the formulas prescribed by multi-lateral agencies, in particular the World Bank. Policy tends to focus on macro issues including creating the enabling environment (industry regulation and privatisation, infrastructure development, human resources) and reducing transaction costs, increasing transparency, efficiency and access to services through e-commerce and e-government."<sup>4</sup> The thrust has been to push developing country governments to create conditions for the market to deliver the bounties of the information age. Rich countries and powerful multinational corporations – telecom, software and hardware - have bulldozed their way into markets of the South, carefully avoiding LDCs (Least Developed Countries) and unremunerative areas within developing countries. Most LDCs have been unable to mobilize required resources for building their basic infrastructure for joining the information highway, and any hopes they held for international financing commitments were dashed in the political dismissal at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) of international aid in this area. Without appropriate capacity to fund the macro-level infrastructure of the IS, many developing and least developed countries have opened their doors to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and to some blatantly for-profit micro level projects, that seek to 'serve' remote areas, but without any impact other than to further the propaganda purposes of corporates and donor agencies.

Further, free trade and IPR agenda ride on the ICT powered market place, offering solutions to poverty and unemployment through formulations that undercut public investments. Institutional reform for greater efficiency is sought to be achieved through ICTs, and concerns about exclusion are treated as policy adjuncts to the efficiency thrust. **Thus, within this market-led and market-oriented IS formula, gender, as also other issues of social policy and inclusion like universal access, local content etc, are appended unapologetically to the dominant market model.**

At the micro level, ICTD, as it currently stands, is mostly premised on virtues of self-interest, competition and 'win-win' approaches, packaged in uneasy ways into development projects. Development aid for projects at the community level have not really been guided by tried and tested concepts in gender theory. Often pilot projects have latched on to opportunism – of available funding or corporate partnerships - that has instrumentalised women in telecentre or mobile telephony based experiments, failing to address systemic and structural issues in respect of gender relations at the local level. These projects have mostly excluded the marginalized – based on the too-poor-for-pilots 'theory' - and accentuated socio-economic differences rather than bridge them. **Projects have thus sought to be moulded, and women fitted, into an interpretation of digital opportunity that is based on an apolitical, techno-deterministic, market-oriented paradigm.**

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<sup>3</sup> "A Development Agenda for Internet Governance – Call for A Framework Convention on the Internet", IT for Change's submission to the UN Internet Governance Forum, see [www.ITforChange.net](http://www.ITforChange.net), August 2006

<sup>4</sup> Donna Vaughan, "ICT4D - Linking Policy to Community Outcomes", <http://topics.developmentgateway.org/ict/rc/filedownload.do?itemId=1069161&intcmp=916>, August 2006

Adhering to aid related dictats that have originated in Northern constructs of digital opportunity that prioritise markets over people, projects on the ground have taken the path of expediency – buying into best practice prescriptions that do not create or strengthen empowering options.

## ***Part 2 - Revisiting the Digital Gap and Reclaiming the Digital Opportunity***

### **The Internet as Global Infrastructure**

Despite its cooption by global commercial and political interests, as a pure technological innovation, the Internet still remains one of the most versatile general purpose technologies of human civilization. It is not only a medium for limitless communication and information-organising, but also constitutes the building block for new institutional frameworks. It is a system that reconstitutes social relationships and knowledge paradigms as well as processes of production, distribution and management. The Internet has made possible the new arenas of 'anti-rival commons'<sup>5</sup>, which gives a radically new context to development. It has grown into a potent social force, which the WSIS Tunis agenda describes as a "central element of the infrastructure of the Information Society" that needs to be used for "enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life."<sup>6</sup>

**It is important to first address structural issues underpinning the construction of the digital space – including characterizing the Internet and its social significance - before addressing the 'digital gap'. We need to move urgently into reframing the IS and its constituent technologies as enablers of "all aspects of community life including economic, cultural, and social development as well as democratic empowerment."**<sup>7</sup> This requires public policy frameworks at global and national levels to ensure that development in the IS follows from the vision articulated in the WSIS documents.

### **Market as the Default IS Ideology**

The dominant IS discourse that heralds the political supremacy of the markets has not evolved by accident. It has been systematically peddled, and has permeated 'business' plans of multilateral aid agencies, 'capacity building' initiatives for developing countries regulators, and design of pilots at micro levels. Although unvalidated, the superiority of the market to lead development in the IS has been legitimized through global policy frameworks. An evaluation by the Bretton Woods project of the editorial policy of Development Gateway – a development information portal, with an accent on ICTD, set up by World Bank - makes the following conclusion, suggesting a striking example of how the dominant discourse has been created and entrenched. "The analysis of the Privatisation and Trade topics (on the portal) that showed that more than 80% of the resources were from northern sources, and 96% were in English. It was also interesting that telecommunications liberalisation was the single most popular theme, reflecting perhaps the interests of northern providers rather than the southern poor."<sup>8</sup>

Plugging the digital gap cannot begin without interrogating this default paradigm. Most crucial in this is the unpacking of the connectivity debate. A broad consensus among ICTD experts is that the proliferation of mobile telephony in the poorest countries testifies to its greater appropriateness over the Internet. In this hasty conclusion, the information society of the South is sought to be reduced to the mobile telephony phenomenon. This shocking reductionism begs a closer examination.

Developed countries have had near-saturation level telephone connectivity for decades now. However, it was the paradigmatic technological breakthroughs in the 1990's, chiefly the phenomenon of the Internet that actually heralded the advent of the IS in these countries. If telephony was not appropriate to epitomize the IS in the North, why must the South make do with a telephony based IS?

Telecom liberalization has certainly brought mobile telephony to millions of people everywhere, and has triggered much socio-economic change. But the IS consists in more basic structural changes, and the Internet is the chief platform for these. Market forces have neither been able to take the Internet to poorer areas and sections of the population, nor have they been able to develop the institutional support systems for the effective use of the Internet for social

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<sup>5</sup> A commons whose value increases for every participant as more participants join it.

<sup>6</sup> WSIS Declaration of Principles [www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html](http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html)

<sup>7</sup> Taylor W. and Marshall S. 2004, Community Informatics Systems: a meeting place for useful research, in Day P. & Schuler D. (eds), Community Practice in the Network Society – Local Action / Global Interaction, Routledge, London

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/doc/knowledge/Gatewayreport.pdf>

transformation. All experience from ICTD projects point to a major role of public policy and public finance in achieving these objectives. However, the abject failure of the market to bring the fruits of the IS to the poor is swept under the carpet, and the mobile telephony phenomenon is selectively used to present a default free market oriented political economy of the emerging IS. The long and short of such representations is that the IS is seen as being associated with private sector leadership, and with little or no role for pro-active public policy and public investments. **Such a dismissal of the role of public policy has resulted in the under-optimal utilization of ICTS for socially disadvantaged groups, including women. And the Internet is thus being denied to millions because it does not fit as easily into the 'business models' of those who have settled into advantageous positions to 'milk the information society cow'.**

A 2004 OECD report on the development of broadband access in rural and remote areas recommended that governments should act cautiously in providing financial assistance for the development of broadband, or including it as part of universal service obligations, until a clearer picture emerged of how new technologies and services, and the competitive market, could be used to foster broadband access in rural and remote regions<sup>9</sup>.

### **Towards a Public Goods Model**

As the dominant forces spend energies on monetizing IS advantages through business and political strategies, much of the IS innovations are left to freewheeling geeks. These are people working on Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), open content platforms and free public wireless connectivity. And the dominant political climate often tends to suffocate these cutting edge IS innovations rather than facilitate them.

In the global South, policies in the area of telecommunications, do not privilege poor women, but telecom MNCs and public sector monopolies that have very high stakes in preserving their existing business model, often resisting innovations that can allow greater diffusion of connectivity. Internet-based telephony is outlawed in many countries simply because of strong pressures from the telecom lobby.

In fact, if one is able to see beyond the ideological smokescreen that has so successfully been created over the IS phenomenon - equating IS with big business - one can easily see that ICTs have many features that make collaborative modes better suited to them than competitive ones. A public goods approach to ICTs in fact has some compelling logic.

One, **basic access to ICTs and their empowering use has such a multiplier effect on a wide range of socio-economic activity that a public provision of these should be the obvious choice.** The opportunity cost of keeping these empowering technologies back from a big majority of people because it does not fit some business models is so huge compared to the cost of their provisioning that the public policy decision on the issue should not be that difficult to take.

Two, the very nature of ICTs makes 'anti-rival' commons possible, whereby as more people avail of them, the value of the 'system' can actually go up for every participant. This additional accumulating value belongs to the group and not to any one business interest. However, business interests have monopolized such 'commons' by setting default standards and seeking rent. Microsoft's monopoly on personal computing operating software is only one example of such usurpation.

Only very recently, open source software initiatives have begun to get public policy support in many countries. Similar support is needed for open content sharing frameworks and for free or inexpensive connectivity infrastructure, which are easily possible today.

**Unfortunately, connectivity is not seen by most governments as a public infrastructure with strong public goods characteristics. Neither do most governments recognize the digital era for its radically different possibilities for sharing content, and developing free and open software, thus conforming to proprietary IP regimes that are held sacred by the market.**

### **Redefining the Digital Gap**

Evidently, the non-inclusion of development concerns in the IS discourse - from the domination of corporate interests and lack of financial commitments from rich countries at global levels, and the absence of a clear public policy vision for deployment of ICTs, to the lack of investments in robust public telecommunications infrastructure at national levels and in

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<sup>9</sup> See, [www.oecd.org/document/43/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_34225\\_31718315\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.htm](http://www.oecd.org/document/43/0,2340,en_2649_34225_31718315_1_1_1_1,00.htm)

institutional mechanisms at local levels for relevant content and services - denies a whole new set of choices to particular countries and groups of people, a majority of whom arguably are women. **However, the issue of the digital gender gap is framed merely in terms of women's equal access to digital technologies within existing paradigms. This narrow vision can at best serve gender equality goals at superficial levels, where women are sought to be assimilated into a space that they cannot own and control on their terms and where gender relations mirror existing patterns of marginalization, exploitation and oppression.**

A ubiquitous society, where everyone is connected is hardly a feminist utopia. It is in fact the connectivity miracle that has fuelled the undermining of labour globally, freeing capital from the limits of national policy and law. The principle of competitive advantage cannot be the organizing principle of an inclusive IS. As we seek to close the digital gap, connectivity paradigms must be built to guarantee inclusion and serve social transformation. The new production and distribution systems which characterize the information age need to create and sustain models built on principles of equity and social justice and values of collaboration, like FOSS, open content and community wireless networks. Such an approach can galvanise new empowering social networks, greater and more equitable economic activity, and accountable public service delivery.

Fundamental to this process is the need to recast the agenda of ICTD in terms of the politics of rights – both in terms of political and socio-economic rights, and in terms of the right to development. Closing the digital gap calls for major realignments in global and national policy that can move towards a public goods approach to ICTs. **It is necessary that the global South has the right to walk the path that developed countries have chosen, in respect of their own development trajectories. In the early stages of their development, developed countries made considerable investments in the infrastructure considered significant for overall socio-economic development. For the global South, a market-led IS is tantamount to “kicking away the ladder of development.”<sup>10</sup>**

### ***Part 3 - Feminist Activism in the IS***

#### **Silences Around Development and the Gender Digital Divide**

Feminist engagement with IS issues has been fragmented and reactive. Indeed media activists have and continue to fight hard to preserve the virtual commons and the space for free expression that the Internet constitutes, putting up an offensive against surveillance states and media transnationals. In this context, feminists have been raising concerns about human rights, online pornography, safety and security in digital spaces and content filtering, calling for appropriate policies. However, **interrogations about the development dimensions of the IS are rather feeble in feminist circles, not going beyond the predominant concern about the amelioration of the digital gap through assertions for improved access. Feminism has not been able to take on and address the deep distortions in global policy and governance of the IS or offer new public policy frameworks that can guarantee an inclusive and empowering IS.**

However, such a critique would hold good even for progressive civil society engaged in IS issues. Most concerns about policy today have come from reactive frames – arguing for frameworks within the limited parameters of the virtual ‘market place’. Thus, we have concerns about spam (sustainability of and trust in the marketplace); privacy (trust in the marketplace); the coordination and management of Internet resources (ensuring the physical and technical ‘sustainability’ of the marketplace); IP addressing (ensuring appropriate property rights for branding); multilingualism, domain names and network neutrality (universality of access to the market); and so on.<sup>11</sup>

By and large, feminism has allowed the emerging IS to take shape without even a basic commentary. **The digital gender gap may thus be seen at its widest, in feminist silences in public discourse on alternative visions for the information society and absence in policy corridors at global and national levels, where the contours of governance of the emerging IS are being shaped.**

Such reticence is highly self-defeating. On the one hand, new challenges around the global governance of the IS are emerging far too rapidly, and require us to think on our feet. On the other, spaces for exploring new ways to share power and redesign global governance are opening up in the information society arena.

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<sup>10</sup> An expression used by economist Ha Joon Chang

<sup>11</sup> Posting made by Michael Gurstein, on the Internet Governance Caucus mailing list, 29/3/2006

## Mapping the Dominant IS Paradigm

Two examples give a good indication of how the IS is shaping up under the influence dominant interests.

The Internet has hitherto developed on principles of openness and equality. These values have been integrated into the Internet through a key architectural principle called the end-to-end principle or the net neutrality principle. This technical principle ensures that the network itself is (mostly) dumb and all intelligence lies in the devices at its ends. Thus, the network treats all 'content' on it equally. This principle is good for the Internet and for its users, but it is not good for 'revenues' because revenue models thrive on 'product differentiation'. **Currently, telecom carriers have started developing models to charge different content providers differently for the 'quality of transit service' they provide. In a single stroke, this approach will kill the basic egalitarianism of the Internet. Paid / commercial content will be more accessible than non-paid.** The policy on this issue is currently being decided, and involves powerful market players and governments of the North, chiefly the US. Once the developed world adopts such Internet policies, the logic of a single global market – operating on a take-it-or-leave-it economic compulsion – may leave little policy space for developing countries to save the Internet within their own jurisdictions.

Another example is the manner in which the global market of Internet connectivity operates. Within the traditional telephony based inter-connection regime, which worked under well-established global policy regimes favouring developing countries, connectivity rules resulted in a net transfer of resources from developed countries to developing countries. The opposite is happening today in the case of Internet connectivity regimes. The paradigm of Internet connectivity between rich and poor nations is purely market driven, with no public policy frameworks that can ensure considerations of equity. The market logic here is that with the Internet mostly owned and controlled by richer countries, in terms of content, applications and connectivity value, it is the poorer countries that 'need' to 'connect in'. So, they had better pay. A person in an LDC in Africa thus pays both for the international transit costs of sending an email to someone in the North and for receiving an email from the North. And the person at the other end in the North pays for neither!

The above examples capture the way in which the notion of 'access' has in fact come to mean a principle of selection and discrimination. **Within the present political context, access in the IS does not imply equal participation in the IS; it is a privilege that you pay for, to avoid being pushed to (and eventually over) the periphery.**

Global policy spaces for the effective participation of all in the IS are either non-existent or fragmented in a manner that allows dominant interests to hold sway. It is important that women engage with the IS discourse, assert themselves in existing and emerging policy spaces and shape the IS in progressive directions.

## Shaping an IS Discourse on Development and Women's Rights

**Women's rights in the IS emerge from 3 vantages – first, the fact that the IS brings a new set of challenges like online pornography, trafficking and other gender based crimes; second, a new lease of life for 'older' rights – the right to information, education etc., the realization of which acquires a new dimension in the IS ; and third, some completely new opportunities for free expression, communication, networking and institutional revamp.**

For feminists, all these contexts of engagement with the IS phenomenon bring in the troubled issue of their relationship with the state and its institutions. Specifically, the opportunity for institutional and structural changes that are implied in the IS, makes working with the state a necessary strategy; one that has not been sufficiently addressed by feminists.

For the majority of the world's women, the IS provides an unprecedented space for asserting their citizenship and for renegotiating their social relationships. The gendered impacts of the IS are both political and economic. For the poorest women, the IS potentially signifies many different things - access to intangible resources like information, new spaces for networking and solidarity, new platforms for self expression, linkages to development delivery, accountable public services, new possibilities for enterprise and new market opportunities. **The rights to health, to education, and to information, transmutate in their meanings when connectivity and content are cast within public interest or public goods models, and policy frameworks favouring (gender transformative) community participation and committed resource investments.**

The IS presents a practical dilemma that is no different from older feminist ambivalences in engaging with the state. Just as our demands for greater participation of women in political structures have to coexist with our critiques of these structures, feminism at the highest levels, needs to come up with credible commentaries of emerging IS phenomena and a vision for what may be its just alternatives. And these alternatives need to be presented in credible institutional and structural forms. **The sanctity of individual rights notwithstanding, an exclusively libertarian approach to the IS discourse runs the risk of negating the interests of large sections of the population including women who are not served by the default IS paradigms.** As global business in the IS subsumes innovations at the margins, coopting open paradigms systematically, public policy needs to step in to guarantee public interest.

**Feminism therefore needs to employ a 'tactical schizophrenia' that can coopt and fiercely defend various freedoms in the IS from assault of the state as well as align with the state in the architecture of new institutional frameworks in the IS, that privilege development. There is no second option here.**

The language of rights in the IS is not only significant for the obligations it places on the part of the nation state vis-a-vis women, but it also straddles the local and global continuum. And in the IS context, where the global assumes a particularly larger significance, underscoring the 'rights' basis of the global governance of the IS, is imperative.

So far, in the IS arena, advocacy and activism has had to contend with a polarization between civil and political rights on the one hand and socio and economic rights / social justice issues on the other. At WSIS, civil society groups from the North have tended to focus mostly on the fundamental freedoms that are associated with the new paradigms made possible by technology, asserting that WSIS is really about privacy, the right to communicate, freedom from surveillance etc. Also, as demonstrated in the WSIS process, there is a belief among many Southern actors that gender justice in the IS is subservient to and even an unnecessary distraction from the ongoing struggle to achieve broader socio-economic progress. A basic task in addressing gender and development in the IS constitutes the building of a new discourse that not only confronts such dichotomies and hierarchies, but clearly locates gender within specific contexts acknowledging the multiple realities and aspirations of women. Feminist groups also need to call to question the legitimacy of sections of civil society in the IS arena, who undermine gender justice and the right to development.

As the emerging IS creates a new context for public policy, and gives birth to new governance frameworks, feminists will need to contend with multistakeholderism in these policy spaces, which envisages a bottom-line consensus among progressive civil society actors, global business interests, and governments – a task that can be painfully antithetical to fundamental feminist standpoints that challenge capitalist motivations and statist hegemony. Even as we participate in these spaces, our allegiance to and inspiration from subversive feminist tactics needs to be that much stronger.

As a new space that requires new rules, the information society is bound to throw up not only old questions in new forms, from pornography to the hegemony of certain knowledge and inequitable terms of trade, but also new issues that concern notions of rights, of the public sphere and of social contracts. These issues are bound to surface sooner than later and many of them in fact face us already. While the goals of feminism remain constant, the IS context brings new representations of reality. Feminism had better keep its quiver packed and ready to negotiate these.