

Community Informatics and Gender - Editorial

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I came into this special issue of the Journal of Community Informatics as guest editor with the rather common sense hypothesis that the notion of 'community' as well as information and communication systems are unequivocally gendered. It is well acknowledged that the marginalities crafted by the information society pursues gendered hierarchies, creating, first of all, the primary faultline separating those with access to and membership in digital spaces and information networks and those without. As importantly, from women's standpoint, the predispositions of the dominant information society paradigm, with its neo-liberal tendencies and hyper individualism, exclude knowledges and networks of solidarity that may not find meaning in belonging to the emerging social spaces and in their codes.

Having worked with the Centre for Community Informatics and Development (CCID) of IT for Change in enabling women to create a communications syntax that corresponds to dalit women's ecologies of information, their worldview, aspirations, struggles and solidarities, I knew community informatics did bring a breath of fresh air to the endeavours of feminism, unlocking new possibilities. There was in the villages of Mysore where we worked with the Mahila Samakhya collectives, a new space for the battle of creative, subaltern energies against structures of information hegemonies steeped in cultures of oppression and exploitation of poor, dalit women. The art of the possible held new hope for women, whose rights as citizens and relationship with local institutions as well as collective organisation and social action were beginning to break out of old impasses. With their own radio program in their local dialect, video content that they customised for their collective learning and reflection processes, and public information centres that they built and began using for making claims, they were able to find and employ a new technique of feminist action through the unique community informatics strategem that gave them voice and unleashed their agency. The change was non-linear and deeper; less didactic and more self-directed, and a curious mix of the dialogic (with the men of their own families about gender discourse) and the antagonistic (with assertions against vested interests in the immediate community and institutions).

The CCID team was also learning alongside; helping women with appropriate technological formats, encountering an uneven playing field with very little market innovation or supportive policy intervention to enable and complement the community informatics project of the Mahila Samakhya women. On the contrary, the nature of the playing field seemed to be replete with patriarchal, elite and inflexible content and technology models, not in the least congruent with the ethos of progressive and inclusive change that could place at the centre, the burning desires and brilliant capacities of women determined to break out of their compact with structures of oppression and perhaps even, the dominant project of development.

With CCID's own experiments, and in the course of the long gestation of this double issue of the Journal of Community Informatics, through the keen insights of the scholars and practitioners who have contributed their writings, I have learnt much

more and in fact greatly, about what feminism brings to community informatics!!

A methodology of transformation

By presenting new ways of knowing and doing, and thus making way for new ecologies and cultures of communication, feminism transforms CI into a radical practice. Axes of power get realigned as women's appropriation of technology for transformative change democratises the local public, embedding women's voice as a valid moral-political force in the local political agora and deliberative space (for instance with women owned/controlled local radio and video). Institutional norms begin to change deeply as new information architectures lead into new pathways and information flows, creating and deepening the legitimacy of women as social actors with valid claims.

New community constellations based on sub-altern ontologies and epistemologies ...

From communities of solidarity and resistance, collective memory and history to communities of choice that disrupt oppressive relationship configurations, the notion of community acquires emancipatory content in feminist constructs of community informatics. Such local and translocal community configurations are about a possible new geography of communities that rearticulates gendered locations, and a new spatiality of collective organising that is based on new social identities.

The local-global as non-linear, contiguous space and feminist practice of technology as deepening the publics.....

The practice of community informatics through gendered analytical frames underscores the fact that the local and global are not polarities but categories representing multilayered space. Thus, the local appropriation of technology is in a dialectic with trans-local forces in as much as the dominant logic shaping information and communication flows globally is simultaneously permeated by sub-global cultures and communities. While the situated experiences of women in relation to information processes do derive also from social norms, the very experience of 'doing technology collectively' can be disruptive of these normative frameworks. The wider policy ecology - again, global, national and sub-national - can enable or constrain these situated experiences. Most importantly, feminist practice of technology in the multilayered local-global invokes debates around knowledge ownership regimes to recover the notion of the commons. An information architecture that is relevant to the most marginalised women cannot be shaped not by the logic of commodification, but of the publics. In the emerging spatialities of the information society, forging communities is not about an escape to digital utopia for emancipation, but a methodology of reclaiming and creating publics that correspond to a contextual and territorialised politics of knowledge.

A framework that brings production and social reproduction together....

The theory and practice of feminist community informatics challenges the celebratory macro-narratives about technology and globalisation in a brave new world. From a critical feminist standpoint, community information and communication architectures cannot derive from a techno-deterministic valorisation of IT jobs or of the magic of mobile phones, but must catalyse a new economics and sociology of the local. These include the possibilities for a more environmentally bound and embedded economics that fetches the surpluses of globalisation to women in their contexts - an antithesis to the dominant information society architecture that coopts the political economy of weak institutions, poverty and gender division of labour to expropriate women's

labour. Also, as mentioned earlier, community informatics practice opens up the possibilities of cultural transformation through discontinuities of tyrannical normative structures. A feminist constructivist approach to women's technology appropriation therefore is about a new ethics of gender that challenges the reproduction of unjust values and practices in and through new knowledge and cultural arenas when the material and the symbolic are simultaneously recast.

I am deeply grateful to Michael Gurstein for his unwavering faith in IT for Change. Embarking on this collaborative project with him has been a great learning experience for me. It has taken long to bring different authors' works to this point, through the processes of reviews and rewritings. I thank all the authors for their contributions, and hope they see this collection as an useful addition to their learning. This issue has had the benefit of the commitment and editorial talent of Anja Kovacs and Shivani Kaul. Anja and I had intense editorial discussions on what kind of mosaic would benefit the grand idea of a special issue on gender, and Anja devoted considerable time to cast the net far and wide to reach the call for proposals to many places across the world and engage the interest of authors through facilitative discussions. Shivani has been meticulous in her coordination and copyediting support and a wonderful team member with whom I have had many spontaneous discussions on the insightful observations of the authors. Eduardo Villanueva and Anupama Joshi have worked very hard on the last mile - enabling the text to be converted into publishable online formats. Anupama also used Krupa Thimmiah's special header design for this issue -in the colour of the women's movement - embedding the text to make it part of this distinctive collection on gender. I am ever so grateful to IT for Change's legacy of critical thinking, theoretical grasp and engagement with the politics of the everyday - the research and CCID team members, past and present, have been remarkably inspiring colleagues.