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**Round Table 3 - Strategic link between policy and research on gender and media,
including technology**

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How are research studies influencing policies?

Given that the Internet has rapidly changed the media landscape, there is extreme flux in policy processes. Both structures of society and structures of media are changing and therefore perhaps, an appropriate question would be, are research studies influencing policies, as developing countries in particular, are mostly playing catch up?

The influence of research on policies is marginal, if at all.

Gender equality goals call for intersections between policies for connectivity, citizens' right to communicate and participate in the public sphere, technology policies (standards) and gender equality laws and policies. Coherence and complementarity across policy domains are critical.

Policies in developing countries in this intersecting area of digital spaces in general and gender and digital spaces in particular, have been fragmented and knee-jerk. More than the role of evidence, there has been an emphasis on governing by ambiguity, since institutional maturity in terms of rule of law and policy coherence is weak, and policy making is unable to cope with highly dynamic market trends.

In India for example, a section of the IT Act, Section 66A implicating freedom of expression, was recently held as unconstitutional. On the positive side, we have also seen a movement in reinterpreting existing law. A special committee looked at implications of proactive disclosure in the context of digital communications, under the RTI legislation. Recently, policy contours on net neutrality were widely debated recently – but notably, women's groups were absent in this debate.

Research about the Internet - in terms of access and participation, runs a big risk. Even as you collect the data, the phenomenon has changed. The shift is usually a quantum change as mobile phones, especially smart phones, change social sensibilities. Youth in developing countries have taken to social media, and their interactions online suggest the need for a deeper grasp of the way social intercourse is altering, so that we can address emerging gender issues through policy.

The speed of changes also means that the complexity of issues is huge. For example, a recent multi-country research focusing on the urban poor in 10 capital cities – [Women's Rights Online](#) – shows tremendous variation across countries. It challenges us to think out-of-the-box with respect to gender, media and technology. In Manila (Philippines) and New Delhi (India) there is no gender gap in Internet access, but in Nairobi (Kenya), Kampala (Uganda), Maputo (Mozambique) and Jakarta (Indonesia) gaps are huge. It is not as if things are hunky dory in the Philippines and India for women, with respect

to equality in access. So, what the research suggests is that we need to go beyond glib assertions of women's participation online, to discern power and gender through new lenses. In all these cities, it may well be that the marginalised are not being able to meaningfully use and participate in the emerging media landscape, since we do know that certain antecedents like education, income and such other things do matter, in addition to gender.

Policy changes have been motivated by research where political will for adapting democracy in an Internet-mediated world is strong. The Center of Studies on Information and Communication Technologies (CETIC.br) has been coordinating publishing national statistics and indicators on the availability and use of Internet in Brazil. These studies are a reference for the elaboration of public policies that ensure popular access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), as well as to monitor and evaluate the socioeconomic impact of these technologies. But even here - as in the case of Brazil, where a Civil Rights Framework for the Internet exists - the moral impetus for policy has come from a political readiness for a new social contract.

As in the case of women's vote, the issues for policy in relation to the Internet are more about ethics and frameworks of democracy. They are ethico-political.

The detailing in terms of how research can shape policies in specific domains can be worked out well if the overarching ethico-political framework with respect to the community is articulated. This is much more than a knowledge process, it is a political process. The question is - *“Do governments want foundational change with respect to women's appropriation of media?”* The Women's Rights Online research found that women who are politically active offline are twice as likely to use the Internet. This data can become a powerful basis for changing women's role in society, but *“do governments want women to become active citizens, with civic intelligence and social networks?”*.

What issues need additional research?

Today, we have lots of innovative practice on the ground - with women citizen reporters, women running community media and women forging communities through online platforms. These practices touch a huge gamut of policy issues for digital equality and egalitarianism, including the fact that digital media spaces are vital for equity and justice. But we see larger structural and political economy factors play an imp role in policy. These trends include:

- A subversion of community media as a tool for political authoritarianism, thus overturning hard won gains of the women's movement,
- A certain market fetishism, accompanied by the popular myth 'some Internet is better than no Internet', in the important debates on the role of mobiles for development,
- A policy paralysis on the governance of media structures

Secondly, in a platform based ecology, questions of media and women's participation require us to understand identity differently. Social media is a space for different genders – a powerful campaign called ‘For a better FB’ was recently initiated in India, against Internet slandering, misogyny, and blocking of women’s profiles, through mass reporting.

Thirdly, a major challenge for policy making is the need to understand what negative and positive

freedoms need to be balanced. In the emerging environment, existing rights frameworks will need to be interpreted differently - women's right to self expression needs to be balanced with the liabilities, obligations and business freedoms of Internet platforms. We cannot make social media companies adjudicators of gender justice. Understanding identity in policy is therefore about more than just digital inclusion policies.

Therefore, we clearly need a deeper knowledge base on many things.

1. **Frameworks** – We need conceptual work that is disruptive – for instance on user rights versus citizen rights; continuities and departures in new and old rights; commons based theoretical basis for gender justice in the Internet age, constitutional jurisprudence, etc.

2. **Interpretive and normative approaches** – The Women's Rights Online research cited earlier found that nearly 100 percent users of the Internet are on social media. Now, does this mean this expands the social capital of the poor? The same research found that barely 1 percent women Internet users find networks of support online. The approaches to knowledge and research must answer the question - *what needs to be done so that the enabling policy environment offers the most marginalised women a communicative environment that promotes their rights?* This is a normative approach.

3. We need research on **international benchmarks** – We need ways to measure women's participation in e-government, women's digital literacy, etc. We do need to shift the indicators debate with respect to the SDGs so as to be able to measure structural aspects. It is not enough to look at numbers of women in media anymore.

4. Focus on **identity and gender** - The newer forms of identity politics at play the world over, have failed to generate a truly inclusive alternative vision of community and family. They have, as commentators like J. Devika in India have observed, made identities more rigid – as reflected in a huge essentialism around femininity, instead of reflecting the real dynamism of social change.

Finally, the question - Is there data on whether national, regional and international partnerships are giving impetus to gender equality in media?

My organisation, IT for Change, believes that partnerships are helpful when frameworks are shared. What we know from existing research is that multi-stakeholder partnerships have many times meant data for market expansion, win-win discourses that obfuscate questions of local autonomy, and a sidestepping of social justice concerns.

The accountability parameters of global partnerships for development is vital, and this question is central for research.
