

## Workstream on 'Political participation, agency and e-government'

### Concept Note

#### Enclosures:

**Annex 1** on 'Women's Political Participation and ICTs: Existing Indicators, Frameworks and Measurements' ([www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/Annex%201%20.pdf](http://www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/Annex%201%20.pdf))

**Annex 2** on 'Case Studies : Exploring the transformatory potential of ICTs for enhancing women's political participation' ([www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/Annex%202.pdf](http://www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/Annex%202.pdf))

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#### Introduction

Feminist engagement with technologies has come a long way from the pessimism of the early 1980s, to the current recognition of the emancipatory potential of technologies, especially the new ICTs. In fact, feminist activists and groups have increasingly highlighted the new spaces for transformatory politics that ICTs have opened up, especially in contexts where women's freedom of expression in the national public sphere is severely curtailed by authoritarian regimes or prevailing socio-cultural norms. Especially after the Arab Spring, there has been a lot of interest in exploring the transformatory possibilities of online social networking and social media platforms, for political mobilisation and organising, in feminist and other activist circles. Therefore, at the current moment, the relevance of ICTs for feminist political activism, which may have needed defending even a decade ago, is no longer a challenge. On the other hand, the need of the hour is to guard against an over-optimistic approach, as there are some important concerns around the issue of ICTs and women's political empowerment and participation that impinge upon women's rights and demand a strategic engagement and response from gender equality advocates.

The sub-topics that we have selected for our work stream highlight these concerns.

## Sub-topics

### **1. The potential of ICTs in supporting women's resistance to mainstream politics through campaigns and subversive organising**

It is well-acknowledged that social media platforms such as Facebook open up new opportunities for women to exercise their right to freedom of expression. However, such spaces are not totally free of threats : repressive state regimes can be intolerant of expressions of dissent by their citizens on these online platforms; and corporates owning these social media platforms can resort to arbitrary censorship measures if they sense a threat to their business interests. Women themselves use online spaces for organising and are being mobilised by different actors, and get co-opted into retrograde politics. Yet, there are creative ways by which women's groups have shamed parochial interests (<http://www.movements.org/case-study/entry/the-pink-chaddi-campaign/>) and unethical and sexist corporate conduct (<http://www.baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/baltimore-feminists-prank-victorias-secret-and-spark-an-internet-revolution/>) using digital tools and spaces.

Against this background, we would like to deliberate upon the following questions:

- How open are the platforms for social networking? How does 'private' ownership of these 'public' spaces affect organising for resistance?
- What kinds of threats lurk in these spaces to women's communication rights?
- What strategies – global and local – should we adopt to effectively utilise the opportunities offered by online spaces for women's freedom of expression and association?

### **2. ICT-enabled initiatives for networking and capacity-building of women in public office and enabling women to emerge as a strong political constituency**

Online spaces enable women to organise and find solidarity to build a presence in the public sphere, especially in contexts where their public participation is severely curtailed in the local and national public spheres. They also present an unprecedented opportunity for women in formal politics to forge a common platform<sup>1</sup>. It is also possible to conceive of new ways in the digital era through which women politicians can reach out to, and cultivate a

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of such a model, see the case study on the *Gramamukhya* web-portal in Kerala (India), enclosed at Annex 2.

strong political constituency among women. However, harnessing the fluidity that ICTs bring about between the public and private spheres for such processes needs vision and careful design to build networks of trust. Such initiatives are still few and far between and also rather nascent, where they exist.

While mainstream politics has often co-opted women as an interest group, it is not necessarily for progressive politics. It is about time we explored how women in public office and women's political groupings can come together through online spaces to promote progressive politics that serves the interests of economically and socially marginalised women, who comprise the majority. Therefore, under this sub-topic, we would like to reflect on the following questions:

- How can we effectively use ICTs to connect women's grassroots groups with women in public office? What network models and capacities are needed for this?
- How can ICTs enable women in formal politics to build a shared agenda?

### **3. Use of ICTs for enhancing women's ability to engage with state institutions, both as rightful claimants of public services and other entitlements and as citizens in local public deliberations and governance processes.**

There has been a lot of optimism about the potential that ICTs offer for making public service delivery more effective (through initiatives such as ICT enabled single-window service delivery centres) and in enhancing the inclusion of geographically remote populations in democratic processes such as web casts of public consultations, e-voting and online grievance redressal systems. However, there are some concerns. In most contexts in the Global South, many e-governance<sup>2</sup> models have been unsuccessful as they have failed to dislodge existing patron-client relations that exist around entitlements and public services. Digitisation measures that have not been well thought out in local public service delivery have adversely affected the rights of poor and marginalised groups, including women, by making certain processes even more distant, centralised and opaque. The possibilities for e-democracy measures (such as online voting) to increase transparency and accountability can be effectively realised, only when steps are undertaken to build public access infrastructures for connectivity and e-participation, with design principles and

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2 E-governance includes three core components: e-administration, e-services and e-participation . 1) policy making and planning processes around the use of ICTs in administration 2) delivery of basic services and public information via ICTs; 3) empowerment of stakeholders, particularly women, to use the networking opportunities opened up by ICTs for engaging with governments.

processes that are contextually-appropriate and gender sensitive.

We would therefore like to deliberate upon the following questions, under this sub-topic:

- What has been the experience with e-governance so far, and how can ICTs transform the capacity of local institutions to be responsive to women?
- How can ICTs change citizen-state interactions in local governance – making it possible for contemplating a new approach to participatory development where women<sup>3</sup> are able to shape agenda, conduct social audit of government programmes and exercise their right to information?

### **Specific gaps and challenges in the area of exploring the potential of ICTs for enhancing women's political participation**

To aid your reflections around the sub-topics, we would like to place before you some specific gaps and challenges that we have identified. This includes both the gaps at the discursive level ( i.e. gaps in existing global frameworks, high level goals and indicators in this area) as well as gaps at the level of field interventions. A detailed list of the global frameworks we studied is outlined in **Annex 1**. Case studies of some selected specific field interventions that we studied, in order to identify operational gaps and challenges are described in **Annex 2**.

#### ***Gaps in existing global frameworks***

##### **1. Women's political participation – emphasis on measuring formal leadership and lack of attention to 'women as citizens'**

Women's rights to equality, political participation, and voice have been long guaranteed in international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and many others. However, existing frameworks, declarations as well as quantifiable indicators

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3 For specific recommendations on gendering e-governance, we would like to direct your attention to the 2010 Handbook on 'Gender, ICT Policy and e-government in Africa' published by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Retrieved [http://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/2987/Bib.%2024586\\_I.pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/2987/Bib.%2024586_I.pdf?sequence=1)

for assessing the level of women's political participation, tend to focus on women in elected positions, and often ignore the active citizenship dimension of women's political participation. For example, in the Millennium Development Goals, Goal 3: *Promote gender equality and empower women*, the only indicator pertaining to women's political participation is Indicator 3.3 which measures *Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament*. Of course, using the percentage of women in parliament as a proxy to assess women's political participation is questionable as merely measuring the proportion of women in parliament is not an adequate measurement of women's political participation, political power and agency. It has also been the experience post the Beijing PFA and subsequent measures with gender mainstreaming that women parliamentarians, politicians and bureaucrats are not necessarily by default sensitive to gender issues and women's rights.

There have been some exceptions to this overall trend. For example, the United Nations released a report by the Secretary-General in 2010 to present indicators for the Implementation of the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which has focussed on some dimension of women's citizenship, in its targets for measuring women's political empowerment and participation. **On the whole, however, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the citizenship dimension in global level frameworks, goals and indicators that seek to assess women's political participation.**

## **2. ICTs and women's rights – No explicit connection made in high-level goals**

The importance of ICTs and the Internet as tools for poverty reduction, development and as enablers of other rights have been acknowledged in the Millennium Development Goals, as well as in reports of UN Special Rapporteurs, and declarations and policy documents from groups such as the OECD, G8 and the European Council. The connection between women's rights and technologies has been highlighted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Declarations from the World Summits on the Information Society in 2003 and 2005, as well as many UN declarations and documents. However, at present, the role of ICTs is only measured in the Millennium Development Goals under Goal 8: *Develop a global partnership for development*, through target 8.F: *In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.*

Target 8.F. has been criticised by women's groups for not adequately including women's effective participation as a measurement or indicator for the target. Access to or use of ICTs and the Internet is not a target, nor a measured indicator, for any of the other seven Goals, including Goal 3: *Promote gender equality and empower women*.

**We would also like to highlight that there seem to be no global frameworks located at the three-way intersection of gender equality, ICTs and political participation.**

## **Challenges at the implementation level**

As the selected case studies enclosed at **Annex 2** indicate, there are a number of implementation level challenges that arise while exploring the potential of ICTs for promoting women's political organising, strengthening women's political networking and enhancing women's access to entitlements and public services.

We would like to highlight some of the most important areas of concern.

### **1. Ensuring meaningful access for marginalised communities :**

The issue of ensuring appropriate connectivity infrastructure, and development of relevant online content for marginalised groups remain main challenges. In the area of using ICTs for enhancing public service delivery, the design of appropriate models for promoting public access and effective processing of entitlement claims of marginalised groups, remains a key challenge, especially in the Global South. The question of how ICTs can be harnessed for empowering non-literate women who are rooted in oral cultures, still needs to be effectively addressed.

### **2. Ensuring that women's groups using the Internet spaces for subversive organising are alert to potential threats:**

Experiences of feminist groups such as the organisers of the Pink *Chaddi* campaign in India, and the Uprising of the Women in the Arab World campaign (See **Annex 2** for details) reveal the urgent need for critical reflection on the exact degree of 'openness' of the online social media platforms that have been used for social networking and political mobilisation. This needs us to examine online censorship by state and non-state actors, as well as how

private ownership can affect sustainability of political initiatives.

*We hope that this concept note and the enclosed Annexures give you a better picture of the concerns we would like to reflect on, during the break-out.*