

## **Gender policy for the Information Society - Knowing where to start and what to look at**

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### 1. Neo-liberal socialism in the network society

In the second edition of his book *The Rise of the Network Society*<sup>1</sup>, Castells postulates that the dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools. The business of policy therefore has to respond to historical continuities and discontinuities – grasping the hybrid defined through the techno-social dialectic. So, when we talk about gender policy in the network society, we need to examine the manner in which societies “structured around the bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self”<sup>2</sup> - are evolving.

Women's relationship with technology has been problematised in a huge body of work by feminists. The current conjuncture, where life, play and work are seamlessly woven in and through networks, throws up new questions for gendered relationships and identities - some may believe that the virtual space unlocks a whole lot of choices, and others may submit that all virtuality is nothing but narcissism, but it is clear that the questions of identity, sexuality and sexual freedom, are transforming.

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<sup>1</sup> Castells, Manuel. 2010. *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume 1*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Our encounters with social media reflect how we are caught within a market paradigm where the social is instrumentalised for private gain. Thanks to the social power of online platforms, “everything that was once external to economic logic, such as friendship, is quietly brought within it”, and “advertising is tailored to specific individuals, (and) tastes and behaviours can be traced in unprecedented detail.”<sup>3</sup> And of course, if companies like Facebook want to, they could manipulate social behaviour innocuously through their experimental ideas, in the hope of infecting much larger networks. William Davies calls this predicament in current society, “neo-liberal socialism”.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. A feminist reading of online sociality

### a. Monetisation of social reproduction:

Notwithstanding its downsides, virtuality has been unequivocally rewarding for women's self expression, individuation, and relationships. But the commodification of sociality online subverts long standing feminist critiques of mainstream economics and its undervaluation of social reproduction. Thanks to neo-liberal socialism, social reproduction in the online world is valuable, only insofar as it can be monetised by capital.

How gendered sociality will evolve is an ethico-political question and depends very much on - whether we are able to think outside of neo-liberal socialism, scrutinise its valorisation of individual self interest and vest in social connections meaning and value that is not necessarily mediated by the economy, online or otherwise.

We must retain the hope that spaces that cohere online can be places for self discovery, solidarity, dialogue, community and resistance offering new horizons

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<sup>3</sup> Davies, William. 2015. *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being*. London: Verso. p 93

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 104

for gender-based transformation. This hope must inform the building blocks of all economic and social policy.

b. Body politics in network capitalism:

The network society or information society restructures institutions. The normative flux one is witness to across all institutions disrupts older patterns. One has to contend with the informational state, and new markets where commerce flourishes without national borders and legal regimes, helping the astronomical increase in global sales of arms, drugs and flesh trade.

The pace at which technology spurs socio-cultural and psycho-social change leaves law and policy clumsily trudging behind, catching up in bits and pieces. Those who comprise the peripheries of the network do not have the capabilities to navigate these spaces of flux and decode the new organisational forms and their protocols. For example, new digitally mediated organisational forms that seek to generate wealth by disciplining poor women through micro credit and other bottom of the pyramid market strategies expropriate the labour of poor wage earning women in South Asia. Connectivity and participation in open platforms may do little to transform gender relations, given how network hegemony reproduces older forms of power. Manufacturers of violent porn games online, repeatedly assert that the brutality in the games is nothing; they insist that the women in the games are not real. Only it turns out that cybersex operations involving children bear great similarity to the games. Parents of children rescued from cybersex rings in the hinterlands of the Philippines, believe that online performance of sex, based on client demands, was not harmful because there was no physical abuse<sup>5</sup>. The body politics of the virtual exhorts us to relook at the material underpinnings of fantasy, the global industry of cybersex and its subversion of space, in emerging narratives of exploitation.

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<sup>5</sup> Murdoch, Lindsay. 2014. "Philippine children exploited in billion-dollar webcam paedophilia industry". *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 8. <http://www.smh.com.au/world/philippine-children-exploited-in-billion-dollar-webcam-paedophilia-industry-20140708-zszsd.html>

### c. Big data hegemony and the ethics of locality:

With the civilizational discovery of data power, we are now told that the data revolution will sweep away all ailments in development, including gender inequalities. The bigness of data of course hides more than it reveals, and big data transfers control of people's destinies to faraway corporations and global number crunching firms. Big data can bring back versions of truth that replace the legitimacy of other ways of knowing, undermining the ethics of locality. There is much that will need to be made legible at scales and spaces that are small, where gender is configured in particular ways. This needs another kind of datascape – data that is not for sale, and data that is respectful of privacy. Digital-scapes provide new pathways for claiming and valuing the diversity and particularity of women's experiences, while interrogating patterns we see in collectivities. Local data systems – that are part of people owned data commons are important so that social constructions of gender can be made to reveal themselves both in their unique/ particular and general/ macro orders.

### 3. A gender policy framework – Equality of autonomy

At the foundational level, frameworks for gender policy in the network society must concern themselves with

- the neoliberal usurpation of online sociality
- the exploitation of women's bodies and labour through new institutional formations
- and the dangers of big data architectures and the possibilities for valuing women's knowledge.

The notion of “*equality of autonomy*” provides a good framework for gender policy in the network society. Based on Amartya Sen's “capabilities” approach, this framework involves “addressing issues of choice and control and the

independence people have in order to make decisions<sup>6</sup>. Sen emphasises the “functionalities” people need to make practical choices, “to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value”<sup>7</sup>. While he is in favour of active intervention of the state in people's lives, his approach argues that such intervention should be towards “fostering of people's self-creation rather than their living conditions.”<sup>8</sup>

Following from this, women's equality and autonomy in the network society will be predicated upon:

- the essential complementarity of the social and economic, in policy making; social is not residual, to be fixed post facto, following economic policy.
- a rejection of grand narratives of gender coming from global purveyors of neo-liberal policies
- deterrence to restrain retrograde cultural determinism through which local patriarchies assert male visions of female choice
- an expanded meaning of women's citizenship in the information society to promote their equal participation

#### 4. Directions for gender policy in the information society

From online micro work to BPO jobs and possibilities for women's entrepreneurship, the digital economy brings new opportunities for women, but the structures of the global economy have adapted ingeniously to reproduce sexism and undermine gains in labour rights and care work discourses. The foundations of social policy need to be based on a futuristic vision of women's capabilities for economic contribution. The information society will not magically transform the material embeddedness of the millions of women in the global south deriving sustenance from agriculture, traditional occupations and

<sup>6</sup> Crowley, Niall. 2015. “Equality and Human Rights: An Integrated Approach”. Equality and Rights Alliance. [http://www.eracampaign.org/uploads/Equality & Human Rights An Integrated Approach.pdf](http://www.eracampaign.org/uploads/Equality%20&%20Human%20Rights%20An%20Integrated%20Approach.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Sen, Amartya. 2001. *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 291.

<sup>8</sup> May, Todd. 2008. *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

dependencies on natural ecosystems. Gender policies for their participation in the information society as economic agents requires the creation of new, local information and communication networks – information commons, public access computing facilities focussing on higher order digital skills and learning; online community platforms that facilitate virtuous production-consumption cycles locally, and affordable and community owned infrastructure that women can co-manage. Skills to learn about and navigate the information society are not only for girls and women in STEM. The tools to interpret the Castellsian “Net” must be part of the basics of learning, and learning about the “Self”, with a menu in early schooling that includes programming languages and critical reading of media.

So far as the privatisation of health and the unthinking transfer of care burdens on women continues to plague national imaginaries of progress, the information society opportunity for women will be nothing more than a call for greater diffusion of mobile phones and accolades for the miracles of market price information services – as if connectivity and price information in and of themselves can democratise gender power. E-government frameworks in fact need to address those conditions that reproduce life – with creativity and responsiveness that makes women's access to public services simpler and empowering. E-government could very well become an instrument of marketisation of the state, commercialising state-citizen interactions and bringing unaccountable private intermediators into the scene, unless it is reclaimed from its neo-liberal moorings. Policies that encourage local media, promote gender based debates and discussions in community media, regulate big media and push for progressive gender discourse through preferential treatment for marginalised knowledge and cultures, are vital.

The individualism and instinct to tame sociality, inherent to the network economy, signifies the new faultlines of social power. Intermediaries – in the form of banking agents tied into financial superstructures of the network economy; aggregators in

the city who run everything from taxi services to real estate and more, and platform monopolies that govern our online lives – social media, search engines and the rest – reflect new structures of rent-seeking in our networked world. These seemingly autonomous pathways of the information society are obviously a function of socio-political vision. Unless imagined differently, the information society will exacerbate divisions between men and women, and women and women, as connectivity and data deepen inequality and create new hierarchies of exploitation and oppression between those who operate the new levers of control and others who are controlled to create, share, consume and love. The business of gender policy must hasten to accomplish – as Sen avers – the freedom to lead creative lives.