

Background

The proposed book on Feminist Visions of the Network Society, is an idea that emerged through the fortuitous alliances of learning and exchange that happened through a research programme, CITIGEN Asia (see www.gender-IS-citizenship.net), initiated by IT for Change in 2010. The programme, supported by IDRC, attempted to encourage a southern feminist inquiry in the emergent spaces where technological affordances intersect with social process. There was a strong case for politicising the discourse of technology for development in relation to the broader questions of participation and power. IT for Change felt that this was a task well suited to feminist inquiry rooted in the global South. An equally important and related imperative was to revisit gender and citizenship theories from the standpoint of a transforming public sphere to explore how destabilisations arising from the information or network society generate new framings for equity and gender justice.

CITIGEN-Asia has contributed to analyses that go beyond access-centred arguments vis-a-vis digital technologies to grasp women's participation and citizenship. In adopting a 'network society' frame, the programme positioned marginalised women's experiences and perspectives in relation to techno-social spheres as the analytic pathways to interrogate the very nature of digital spaces. The scholarly work of the programme allowed an exploration of the structures and architectures of digital spaces – their discursive contours and norms; the key actors defining such spaces, their motivations and interests; and the everyday practices within these spaces that inscribe and reinscribe relationships and cultures.

The programme has created a unique opportunity to engage feminist critique and imagination about democracy and gender in the new spatial and relational alignments wrought by network society. The feminist mapping of experiences of marginality and political subjecthood that the programme opened up, is a project critical to contemporary social and developmental readings of democracy and gender.

Key questions the book will focus on:

The proposed book builds from the conceptual contributions of the CITIGEN network. It will explore the performance of citizenship in network society as a techno-social process, specifically investigating:

- How marginalised women define their positionality and place; generate new norms, practices and cultures; and make claims through digital space (how modes of agency and active citizenship are recast)
- The transforming public-political space – the political agora – of feminist action, for its discursive content and relational architectures (how the online meets the off-line to create new thresholds and spaces).

Theoretical discussion

The essays will also offer empirical analysis and theoretical reflections that go a step further from explorations to the questions above, towards an attempt to build grounded theory that is a Southern feminist standpoint on digital technology, network society and women's citizenship. These, inter-

alia, would address the overlapping areas of -

- What a Southern vision of citizenship in the network society would be, teasing out the meanings of social membership and agency that grapple with women's lived experience, as digital mediations shift spatial scales of communication and community.

This thread is particularly relevant given the need for explanatory frameworks that go beyond binary constructions of online and offline. Some of the analysis on the trans-local promise for solidarity and movement-building through new technologies today seem to be consumed by techno-euphoria. Undoubtedly, the network era has ushered in new cartographies of feminist politics. The routes for claims-making are manifold, and not just linear strategies in relation to the nation state. Yet, the actualisation of citizenship is a question that has to engage the physical-material and the discursive-ideological. As Saskia Sassen observes, a theory of political subjectivity must be able to present a coherent analysis of how sited (physically embedded) materiality inter-twines with global span (made possible by virtual space). This step forward therefore needs to tie in the promise of the digital with an understanding of flows of power in network age architectures of society, democracy and governance. Conversations from the CITIGEN programme alert us to how 'facebook campaigns' cannot replace longer term strategies required to address the informal and formal structures and institutional arrangements in relation to which women negotiate their everyday lives. What conceptual categories would enable the proposed book to move towards such a theoretical robustness?

- How regimes of production, use and governance of technology intersect with the public-political character of digital spaces. What kind of regimes would actively nurture the promise of citizenship for marginalised women in network society.

The logic and structure of technology is shaped by forces that control it. At the turn of the millennium, Lawrence Lessig's thesis on the Laws of Cyberspace, and his famous quote, 'code is law', pointed to how digital space embodies the contestation between the public and private whereby the rights of the private require to be balanced against the interests of the public. Over the past decade, global capitalism has succeeded in privatising the digital commons. The Arab revolution notwithstanding, the celebrated potential of the Internet for radical change is entrapped within the hegemonic architectures of control in the digital arena – global monopolies, the patriarchal state and meso institutions like religious authorities. The 'privatised public' that social networking sites represent, is far from the public agora that seemed to be tantalisingly post-gender in the initial years of the Internet! Feminist imaginaries of digital space and its citizenship-based renderings presuppose a critical engagement with regimes of production, use and governance of technology. What worldviews in this regard would reclaim the promise of digital technology for transformative change?

The book would be an important contribution not only to multi-disciplinary scholarship on gender, democracy and development, but also present pioneering analysis for a radical interpretation of network society. The essays will be about 6000 to 8000 words, combining empirical and theoretical approaches. About 12 to 14 essays in all are being proposed.

Time line

Authors will be contacted by June 2012 for finalisation of the chapter plan, the first draft of chapters will be ready by August-September 2012, and revised drafts by October-November 2012.