

Opening Session - Piush Anthony

The concept of information society in the development discourse tends to be provocative, induced mostly by the political geography of its emergence and nature of its existence. In the North, and in the prosperous pockets of South, the new ICTs have recreated and transformed institutions – from media, to governance, business and work organizations, entertainment as well as education and health – to such an extent that the vocabulary of an emerging information society is being invoked. While there has been a critique of these changes from various perspectives by the academia and civil society activists, responses to these developments from a Southern perspective, more importantly, a feminist perspective, have to be grounded in a different footing. Any attempt towards developing such a perspective has to begin by questioning the basic premise of the very exercise – is there an information society in the South at all to critique and engage with? Ostensibly, many consider the concept of information society in the South as nothing more than a poorly disguised attempt to co-opt the South in a North-dominated and corporate-led globalised world, which is becoming more powerful in its hegemony, drawing from the strength of the global communication infrastructure.

For feminist groups in the South, the main agenda is the social, economic and political development priorities, and therefore, skepticism about the information society needs to be juxtaposed with a forthright appraisal of what constitutes information society. In particular, this appraisal would mean an analysis of the nature of new ICTs and their impact on social, economic and political institutions that mediate women's struggles, as well as their potential to fasten the advancements made by women's collectives.

In this context, the two technology paradigms – digitalization and the Internet – assume importance as the prime movers of the technology innovations that constitute new ICTs. The expansion of these new ICTs, mostly in terms of absolute use, has been so influential that it dominates the current discourse on development practice and the relevance of technology-driven information and communication processes. It has become so overarching that some of the older communication and information technologies like the radio and the telephone have also been included under the umbrella term of ICTs, which in turn have inspired the emergence of a whole new sector called ICT4D. The Declaration of Principles of the first phase of the World Summit on the Information

Society in Geneva tried to infuse greater optimism in ICT for development by aligning the ICTD term with the conception of an information society. It called for the establishment of a development-oriented information society.

This being so, and in consideration of the present context of ‘information society’, the issue for Southern feminists is an ‘either /or’ predicament – whether to merely react to the developments and conceptions of a new society in a way that resists technology-induced changes that have hegemonic and exclusionary designs, or whether to explore the scope for positive engagement with the new technologies and the opportunities and subversions that it offers. We witness a dual pre-occupation of resistance and engagement with new technologies and thus emerges a concern that the institutional development brought by such an engagement compromises both the agendas, thus tending to be counter-productive. *Prima facie*, this poses a critical dilemma, but for the feminists in the South this amounts to yet another impasse that they have to grapple with, as in the case of the dilemma of subversion and resistance to the tyranny of institutions, including market and the state, and the imperative for engaging with these institutions. The atypical situation of women in the South has once again led to the need to deal with dualistic engagements even while addressing issues arising out of information society.

Currently, the rallying point for such engagement lies in the processes of the WSIS. The WSIS was conceived in a very technology-led and private interest dominated context, and the result was that it largely excluded traditional development discourses, including feminist concerns from the South. However, as the WSIS processes have moved along, there has been greater democratization of its debates with respect to various perspectives. In the first phase of WSIS in Geneva, civil society met with success in bringing out a communication rights framework in the information society debate. This framework has interesting points of engagement for feminists groups. However, predictably, in the details of the Plan of Action, real commitments on these lines are few and far in-between.

While feminists from the South need to engage more actively with the issues of the right to free expression, the right and means for communication, free media, more open IPRs, etc, which are also issues that attract the attention of civil society activists from the North, there is an additional responsibility of Southern feminists to anchor the

development concerns of women. The current Tunis phase of WSIS and planned follow-up structures to WSIS need to be fully appropriated by them in order to articulate and advocate gender issues in the information society from a development perspective. In this respect, the South Asia region offers greater challenges as a result of inadequately informed theorization and advocacy on issues of women's empowerment and gender concerns within these initiatives, despite the sub-continent being witness to a great number of projects in the area of ICTD. Nonetheless, such pronouncements also need clarity regarding what is referred to as 'gender concerns in ICT'.

The emergence of a gender perspective demands special attention to disadvantages faced by women and its unhindered perpetuation of discrimination. It demands strategies and interventions that would remove such discrimination and disadvantages and offer an alternate paradigm wherein gender concerns are not limited to women but mainstreamed as a matter of justice. Decades of struggle had attempted to influence the discourse and practice, but we still move from one victory to another struggle or a backlash. Advancements in communication and technology in the last decade have showed potential in bringing about many a change in favour of women, through increased access to information and services and increased social and economic opportunities. The interface of gender and ICT has assumed significance in this context. Over a decade of different experiences and innovations in ICT for development, one has witnessed the marginalization of women, as has been the case historically, such as during the period of industrialization. While historical disadvantages of women have not been addressed or are being addressed marginally, there emerge new disadvantages, mostly benign, from new work arrangements, and also imposed as a result of unchanging social codes of gender roles. Gender concerns within the information society therefore take a wide range of engagements that women have vis-à-vis ICT. These engagements, the nature of it or lack of it, individually and/or collectively form the crux of developing a gender perspective on information society.

Women as consumers of information and communication technology pose an array of issues pertaining to affordability and access as well as ownership, creation and appropriateness of content. But when we address women as producers, the issue of the dominant paradigm of knowledge production, which is symbolically referred as

‘testosterone-driven’, brings out a different set of concerns including that of engaging critically with the existing paradigms of knowledge production to influence more gender friendly-knowledge systems and technologies. Similar is the case of women as knowledge workers. While efforts to remove traditional bottle necks for women to access education, especially higher education and technical skills, are making a slow pace progress, gender-blind work culture of the new economy is posing a new set of discrimination that operates in a self-imposed manner. While the distinguishing aspect of a knowledge worker is the technical value-addition to a particular skill, gender concerns in this area open up all the developmental concerns of women’s movements in the South. The above categories of women connote some kind of engagement with the information society; but, a majority of women in South Asia – the large mass of illiterate and semi-literate poor women who are disadvantaged by their gender, class, caste and geographical location of being in remote rural areas, where basic infrastructure is yet to set in – lack opportunities and avenues for any possible engagement with the information society. The promise of ICT and the possibilities of engagement for these disadvantaged women facade a different set of problems including ICT policies, public-private ownership of technology, IPR, investments in technological innovations for development, especially for rural areas etc.

This seminar is the first attempt of its kind to bring together feminists groups from South Asia, who are largely not involved in the space of what is called the ICTD sector, but have been engaging with diverse sectors of gender concerns, to deliberate on and develop the ‘Gender Perspective in the Information Society’. In this respect, we think that this is a unique platform that seeks to bridge the chasm between the ICTD sector and, what can be called in relation to it, the traditional development sector. If the new technologies have to be applied for development purposes in ways that empower and benefit women, the required perspectives and strategies have to come from those who have been engaging with women’s issues in different sectors of development.

The seminar has been designed in such a manner as to avoid the format of ICTD discourse seeking sectoral application. It attempts to involve perspectives from various development sectors like media, work and economy, governance and education that critique the engagement with new technologies. These sectoral perspectives are also to be

seen in relation to the overall information and communication paradigm in development. It is expected that the issues are debated sector-wise and in relation to policy-making in the ICT sector as well as to global IS discourses and policy processes.

We acknowledge the contribution of UNIFEM, who has supported us since the inception of the idea of this seminar and made it possible for all of us to be together. We are also grateful to the APDIP program of UNDP, whose assistance helped us broaden the participation in the seminar to include greater regional representation as well more richness to the deliberations. We are thankful to our partners DAWN and CPP at IIMB who have been of great assistance in holding this seminar.

We welcome all participants especially those who have come from other countries in South Asia and outside of the region.