

Role of ICTs and egovt to promote gender equality in the Asia Pacific -
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A one-size fits all strait-jacketing method to evolving policies and programme guidelines for achieving gender equality through e-gov will not work. Therefore principles of egov that seek to address inclusion and social justice will need to also enable creativity, flexibility and contextual innovation. The content of egov has so far been heavily techno-managerial, driven by the IT department with little focus on transformatory impacts through e-governance. In the absence of principle level articulations of the what, why and how of egov, there is little vision that connects the roadmap of projects to visions of change. Assuming gender neutrality of technology is another big blindspot with e-governance in general.

Since e-governance initiatives have had a heavy slant towards mystified technocratic vocabulary and direct private sector involvement in basic direction setting, they are not perceived in the public eye as an area of governance reform or public administration. (The debates on privatisation notwithstanding, the areas of public health and public education are still seen as intrinsic to public service delivery and hence to citizen rights.) Wider public debate around this arena is thus lacking. Civil society actors, including gender equality advocates, have commented on large scale projects like UID and have raised questions about privacy and data protection, and bemoaning the rise of the 'informational state', but the nuts and bolts of how ICT models can pave the way for effective and accountable governance have not really been articulated by civil society. Therefore, while gender equality advocates are at the cutting edge of grassroots organising around basic governance areas such as the Right to Information, access to livelihood rights under the MGNREGS, access to health, and do perceive the bottlenecks in e-services and kiosk based approaches, they are still unsure about how ICT-mediated transformation can dovetail with the ambitious steps in law and policy for governance reform in general.

On another note, gender equality itself is seen merely as a subset of 'inclusion policies' by policy makers and so, efforts to take women's needs into account have been few and far between, and even where they exist, are more or less formulaic, and don't go the whole distance to ensure systemic shifts in gender ideology or social roles. Early initiatives like e-seva in West Godavari and more recently, Akshaya, have used women as entrepreneurs for their kiosk oriented models, bringing women into new age service delivery. This has had some positive impact in terms of incidental gains wrt women's public presence, work participation and e-literacy. Yet, transformatory impacts in terms of structural change and marginalised women's participation in governance and democracy through ICTs remains an ideal. The entrepreneurs of Akshaya do not enjoy the status of government employees, nor are they able to compete on an equal footing in the market as entrepreneurs. They do not have institutional support for access to finance, marketing and mentoring and in the current scheme of things, they are part of the state government IT Mission's frontline soldiers whose investments provide the government a good last mile infrastructure. On many counts, Kerala's egov initiatives and panchayat based computerisation endeavours are ahead of the rest of the country and incorporate a citizen-oriented approach. The government also does actively encourage tertiary and technical education among girls. Yet, the vision to empower the poorest and most marginalised women through appropriate institutional mechanisms to enter public life and engage with governance in the ICT age, seems to fall short.

The CSC scheme of the dept of IT has raised pertinent questions about how governance logic can be subverted in the wholesale privatisation of public service delivery. For gender justice, a public goods orientation to ICTs must precede e-governance efforts. Further, ICTs need to be embedded in ongoing policy efforts wrt women's access to entitlements; community monitoring and social audit; financial inclusion and access to banking; right to livelihood / MGNREGS; participation in local planning; right to information and local community action for transparency and accountability.

The egov opportunity for gender equality is in the potential for policy to effect foundational changes to existing power structures. To go this direction however requires a strong understanding of how new social equations are born out of the ICT based re-engineering process. Large scale efforts to computerise land records or provide online trading / marketing platforms for agriculture, like ekrishi tend to mirror social structures in their digital architectural design. Where women do not enjoy de facto ownership of land nor can easily assume public roles in agricultural marketing, such efforts tend to benefit men. Ekrishi has bhoomi clubs which function as support groups where women are simply not present. Digitisation can create a moment of social discontinuity through which gender relations can be renegotiated. For instance, a simple disaggregation of grievance related data by sex, can make an MIS system produce deeper insight for the administration about women's needs and governance agenda. Or, having women's names registered as co-owners of houses and land, during digitisation efforts, can enable a small, but important shift in the way asset ownership is gendered. It would also be pertinent to examine more closely through policy research, how gender plays out in ICT innovations in core sectors like health, public distribution system, grievance redressal, MGNREGS that have been undertaken as pilots or as state-government initiatives. Hiccups and teething trouble are bound to be there in innovations that attempt to bring ICTs for greater accountability. Here, political commitment to ensure cross-sectoral networking is vital. For instance, in Karnataka, pilots have been initiated in some districts where every job card holder in the family under MGNREGS is required to have a separate bank account. This measure is based on the insight that men control women's wages and therefore it would be useful for women to have bank accounts in their own names. However, procedural delays at the banking end have placed constraints on women's access to jobs at work sites, where the local panchayat, executing the scheme denies women the right to get a job till she can have her bank account. Next generation initiatives need to explore how best the learnings from mainstream, core sector -led innovations can provide blue prints for convergent approaches. PDS tracking systems using sms can also be a platform for health information or for anganwadi related entitlements.

Mainstream efforts like Mission Convergence have demonstrated how ICTs can provide the building blocks of a new citizen-oriented intermediation and coordination for poor women to seek access to entitlements and public services. Using an NGO-government partnership approach, the model brings together NGO outreach to marginalised women with IT based tracking of entitlements for effective and accountable governance, through creative institutional mechanisms for targetting. Emerging insights from efforts like Mission Convergence and also panchayat level computerisation in Kerala, and NGO initiatives like Abhiyan indicate that the future of women's participation in governance lies in creatively engaging with local information and data in taking to the higher echelons of governance voices and experiences from the ground. Digital processes are key to this. But they presuppose digital literacy and capability of a different kind; one that enables women to use community ICT infrastructure as spaces not only for making claims, but also for tracking and monitoring local development and demanding accountability. Unless digitisation can also make data transparent enough for assessment by geo-political jurisdictions, proactive disclosure of data in the public domain will not make immediate sense

for civic monitoring and action, and would be redundant from the standpoint of marginalised women's participation in governance.

The future of egov in India does have to engage with the piquant problem of privacy and data protection. While specific contexts of service delivery also need to be reckoned with (like the benefits of the Maternal and Child Health tracking system), an umbrella egov policy is indeed important. Moving beyond the generic gains approach, a deeper systemic opportunism for allowing gains for gender equality is required and as discussed above, it entails creative thinking on convergences with multiple areas of governance, piggy-backing and integration with different ideas and policy measures for governance reform and a non-conventional approach to e-literacy. Having an overarching policy on egov, that is led by the IT department is imperative. While mainstream efforts and innovations will continue and can provide new generation alternatives for integration and convergence, the National Mission for the Empowerment of Women, must become the champion for women's empowerment and gender equality through egovernance, providing the technical guidance for how best to serve the cause of gender and social justice when IT meets governance.