Women's political empowerment and ICTs
– Unpeeling assumptions, unpacking half-truths

A backgrounder for discussion

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Note for the wICT4D conference organised by UN Women and the U.S. Secretary of State's Office of Global Women's Issues, Jan 2013

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How have Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) transformed the political and governance landscape, and what does this mean for women's political empowerment?

No one would deny that ICTs have changed the meaning of political action. With the advent of computers, Internet and the mobile, how people come together, deliberate, mobilise action and even organise dissent is not the same. But working towards a transformative agenda is still a long haul. ICTs create new patterns in the landscape of politics and governance, bringing new twists to the pathways of empowerment. How this can help women's political struggles and what may be new challenges to confront, needs to be decoded. Here are some commonly held views and half-truths that may need deeper examination.

1. The online public sphere powered by ICTs has brought new hope to the project of gender equality.

The ICTs revolution, especially the rise of the Internet, has facilitated the emergence of a transnational public sphere. It has opened up spaces for self-expression, exchange of views, dialogue and debate that are free from the control of nation-states. Many have lauded the rise of the online public sphere as the dawn of a new era, wherein social movements and activist groups can realise the transformatory potential of horizontal alliances in their change-efforts. Feminists have highlighted how the online public sphere offers immense opportunities for building a 'communications community' of women across the globe, for challenging entrenched patriarchies. They point out how the fluidity between the spaces of the 'private' and the 'public' that the Internet has wrought, has helped feminist mobilisation in contexts where there are restrictions on women's mobility – enabling the breaking down of barriers that would have been insurmountable in an earlier age. But, is this transformed world within our grasp?

The online public sphere does enable the emergence of decentered, horizontal forms of organising that are much more flexible and creative than older forms of hierarchical political organisation. However, online coalitions and networks may not always be bound to real world ties and struggles. Scholars talk about 'slacktivism' – the version of activism online that is in opposition to committed and sustained action for change. Even though social movements have used virtual spaces effectively in their political mobilisation and organising, the circumstances in which online mobilisation amplifies the impact of transformative political action is still much debated.

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Box 1. Activism and the online public sphere

Likhaan (Centre for Women's Health) is a grassroots organisation based in Philippines that has been actively involved in the decade-long campaign undertaken by women's groups in the country for the passage of a Reproductive Health (RH) bill. In 2010, *Likhaan* took up an action-research project as part of the CITIGEN-Asia research programme[1]. At the time of the research, women's groups in the Philippines were in their ninth year of advocacy for the RH bill. In a context where the discourse of the Catholic Church on the reproductive rights of women has been pre-dominant in the public sphere, *Likhaan* wanted to explore ICT-based strategies for channelising into the public debate on reproductive health the empirical realities of women and youth in marginalised communities.

Therefore, an online magazine was set up by *Likhaan,* and women and youth from marginalised communities were trained to become community journalists. They wrote blogs about their everyday realities and aspirations, talking about why sexual and reproductive health services and rights were critical to their well-being, The project hoped that these accounts would ultimately influence lawmakers both directly and through generating public support, making an important contribution to the campaign for the reproductive health law. The magazine was hosted on the website of *Likhaan*. In late 2012, the reproductive health law was enacted in the Philippines.

What was the contribution of the online magazine to the overall struggle? The community journalists found the process liberating and continued their online efforts along with street based protests, till the last lap of the campaign. They opened Facebook accounts and posted photos and comments. The researchers from *Likhaan* spearheading the project however noted that it was unclear if and how the journalists' stories impacted the mainstream public debate on the issue. Given that a majority of policy makers do not use digital communication modes with citizens, the narratives of the journalists may just have remained invisible.

The community journalists continue to express their lived experiences through photos and commentaries. As some scholars[2] have pointed out, this is where the Italian metaphor of *movimenti carsici,* or rivers in the mountains that disappear for long stretches to reappear elsewhere might be useful. For acts of resistance, online and offline can go on for long stretches without disturbing the existing status quo and erupt suddenly, in unexpected ways, to tip the balance.

Membership of online groups is a way of re-affirming identity and self-worth in an age where globalisation has increasingly disrupted individual lives and fostered a crisis of identity. Many have argued that this atomisation along with the geo-politics of the past decade has resulted in a rise in the membership of fundamentalist groups who have found the possibilities offered by the online space very useful for consolidating their regressive identity politics. As the story of Radio Mullah from North-west Pakistan demonstrates[3], women were willing to breach the traditional rules confining them to the private sphere to be part of the FM radio broadcasts. But co-opted into the Mullah's scheme of things, their voices only added up to reinforce a retrograde political agenda that ironically also included the harking back of the ideal of the feudal patriarchal system. Emancipatory politics in the network society, it is clear, needs to contend with a complex ecology of alliances.

A significant characteristic of the online public sphere is that it is extremely segmented and fragmented. Though rich in informational diversity, it also produces 'an 'echo chamber' effect

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1   For more details, see http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/ Retrieved 19 December 2012
2   http://www.tni.org/archives/act/16305
3   http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/Farida_TP_23Sep2011.pdf

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whereby individuals can easily avoid engagement with opinions and views that contrast sharply with their own world-views. While one can point out that this is true for the offline public sphere as well, the degree of insulation and potential ease of exit from debates is markedly higher in the online space. In fact, in the online sphere of communication – whether media or social networking platforms – business models thrive on filtering information and news based on user interests and the activities of interest-based user communities. The abundance of information in the network age thus does not necessarily lead to richer dialogic communication and debates.

What is evident is that building an agenda for gender equality in the network age demands insight into the emerging structures of exclusion and oppression. To realise the possibilities of the network-age, women's groups need to engage with a multiplicity of agendas and develop the vision and tactics for political engagement spanning local, national and global levels. A new grammar for alliance-building (like the Occupy movement has explored) and new analytical frameworks for engaging with the processes of public policy are crucial.

2. The anonymity in online space makes it the final frontier of subversive feminist political organising.

The online blogosphere has provided a crucial space for feminist organising. However, we must remember that even the extra-territorial spaces of the Internet are not immune to state censorship. States are still capable of instituting large-scale Internet clamp-downs (like the November 2012 Internet shut-down in Syria), and carrying out large-scale filtering such as the mid-2012 blocking of You-Tube in Pakistan, or ongoing censorship of civic activism in China[4]. As citizens use digital spaces more and more creatively to challenge political hegemony, states in the network age are also beefing up their prowess for surveillance. Security experts talk about the 'Panopticon' – a metaphor that conveys the demise of privacy in the digital age as constant visibility becomes the default. In the name of national security, states award huge contracts to multinational corporations to build surveillance systems.

Box 2. State censorship in the network age

Recently, a 21-year old girl was arrested in India for posting a status update on Facebook questioning the complete shut-down of cities for the funeral of a popular right-wing leader from the state of Maharashtra - Bal Thackeray. Her friend was also arrested for "liking" the update which reportedly read: "People like Thackeray are born and die daily and one should not observe a '*bandh*' [shut-down] for that." The girls were arrested under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for "hurting the religious sentiments of others" and Section 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which specifies the punishment for communication made via computer or other devices which may be "grossly offensive," have a "menacing character," or even cause "annoyance or inconvenience". Section 66(a) has invited wide criticism for its draconian nature. Although the arrests invited severe criticism from the Supreme court of India for an abuse of the Information Technology Act, this incident illustrates how the arbitrary powers of the state now extend into online spaces.

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4   http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/gender-is-citizenship.net.citigen/files/CITIGEN%20China%20Report_Final.pdf

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It is also important to recognise that corporates such as Google and Facebook, who dominate the spaces comprising the online public sphere, are not immune to pressures from states. In many instances, they are known to have handed over user data to governments. Corporates also undertake arbitrary content censorship and trade user rights for market considerations.

Box 3. Corporate censorship of online spaces

The Uprising of Women in the Arab World posted a picture of an unveiled Syrian woman holding up her passport (with a veiled picture) and a sign saying "I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because for 20 years I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and my body", on Facebook, in October 2012. The picture was taken down by Facebook as it purportedly violated the site's 'community standards'. Individual administrators of the Facebook group have been temporarily banned from the site, after they objected to the removal of content.

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3. Protecting the right to freedom of expression is a sure way of guaranteeing the openness of the Internet.

New ICTs, especially the Internet, has revolutionised the information and communications realm. Predictably, states are nervous about citizens' new-found ways of exchanging information, mobilising and organising for political rights. The Internet has historically evolved into an extra-territorial space outside the reach of national governments, and as it grows in strength, its unpredictable power makes states increasingly anxious. In this climate, protecting Internet freedoms has become the rallying cry for activists and civil society organisations across the globe. For women, safeguarding free speech online has become a vital agenda as patriarchal barriers to mobility and free expression impede their political participation in the real world context.

However, the openness of the Internet is more than about freedom of expression[5]. It is about the right to communicate; a broader set of freedoms and enablements that account for individual liberties no doubt, but also for keeping the structures of media equitable. In the emerging public sphere, as the definition of rights and freedoms continues to evolve, some critical issues remain unaddressed. The need to protect network neutrality (the Internet equivalent of the common carriage rule in telephony) is one such issue.

Simply put, network neutrality means that the network will not discriminate between the data packets it carries. Advocates of digital rights and freedoms see 'net neutrality' as fundamental for ensuring that the Internet remains a free and open technology, fostering democratic communication. Social campaigns have pointed to how cable and telecommunications companies seek to be Internet gatekeepers, deciding which websites go fast or slow and which won't load at all. According to SaveTheInternet.com for instance, companies want to "tax content providers to guarantee speedy delivery of their data … to discriminate in favour of their own search engines, Internet phone services, and streaming video – while slowing down or blocking their competitors." Scholars like Lessig have pointed

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5   http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/hyping-one-threat-to-hide-another/article4140922.ece

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out that without net neutrality, a handful of massive companies would control access and distribution of content, deciding what you get to see and how much it costs.

The fact that companies currently have the right to influence users while storing user data like browsing history, text messages and call history on their servers, points to the invasiveness of corporate control into our everyday information, knowledge, communication and relationship architectures. Recently, when the US Federal Communications Commission notified net neutrality rules, it exempted Internet-on-mobile from its most important provisions[6]. Even as the mobile has become synonymous with the network age in developing countries, its promise for freedoms is caught in the fledgling institutional legal environment witness to heavy contestation.

Box 4. The political economy of net neutrality – the case of the Google-Verizon pact

Historically, Google has been a staunch advocate of net neutrality regulation. For example, in 2006, Google ran an online campaign for net neutrality, from which the following statement is excerpted:

"Today the Internet is an information highway where anybody – no matter how large or small, how traditional or unconventional – has equal access. But the phone and cable monopolies, who control almost all Internet access, want the power to choose who gets access to high-speed lanes and whose content gets seen first and fastest. They want to build a two-tiered system and block the on-ramps for those who can't pay. Creativity, innovation and a free and open marketplace are all at stake in this fight."

Therefore, in 2010, when Google and Verizon came out with a joint legislative framework proposal on net neutrality that argued for mobile phones to be kept out of the ambit of net neutrality regulation, many were initially taken aback by Google's about-turn. Telecom providers such as Verizon have long argued that net neutrality regulation allows Internet companies such as Google to set up extremely profitable business models by free-riding on the infrastructural backbone of the Internet that telecoms make huge investments in. Net neutrality regulation prevents telecoms from demanding a share in the pie of the burgeoning Internet economy – as it does not allow telecoms to come up with business models such as tiered services. So, how do we fathom Google's about-turn? If we interpret Google's earlier lobbying for net neutrality as a business move rather than an act of public-interest, we realise that Google's about-turn is neither surprising nor contradictory.

In 2006, having established its domination over the broadband Internet, Google clearly had no interest in letting telecom providers have a cut into its profits. But mobiles were a different ball-game. In the year 2009 Google and Verizon Wireless entered into a business partnership to "leverage the Verizon Wireless network and the best of the Android open platform to deliver leading-edge mobile applications, services and devices." As part of this partnership, Verizon Wireless and Google would be co-developing several Android-based devices that would be pre-loaded with innovative applications from both parties as well as third-party developers. The main aim of this partnership was to pose a challenge to the domination of the smart phone market by the iPhone, and specifically the AT & T and Apple collaboration for the distribution of the iPhone.

The Google-Verizon pact over 'net neutrality' came on the heels of this strategic business partnership.

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6   "Free Press Sues FCC to Get Real About Net Neutrality" http://www.ecommercetimes.com/story/73389.html

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Box 5. The big stakes against regulation

The U.S. telecom market is dominated by two players, Verizon and AT&T. Verizon has challenged the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) authority to enforce net neutrality (the Internet equivalent of the 'common carriage' rule), arguing that the Internet is not telecom and thus outside the FCC's mandate. AT&T went a step further. It has claimed that since even traditional telecom services, like telephony, increasingly work on Internet Protocols (IP), the FCC's remit should not cover even telephony. In essence, more or less, the claim is that no regulation of the communication systems is needed at all!

It is only through effective governance in the Internet arena that the right to communicate can be ensured. Public interest considerations, including Universal Service Obligations of Internet Service Providers are central to guaranteeing the right to communicate. Governance frameworks also need to ensure that digital ecosystems that catalyse local democracy with gender sensitivity through programmes for public access points, digital literacy, citizen journalism, community media and public information delivery are created and nurtured. Given the fact that the Internet is a global public good, both global and national public policy frameworks for keeping it 'open' and accessible are critical for women's rights activists.

Box 6. ETNO proposal

The European Telecommunications' Network Operators' Association (ETNO) recently came out with a proposal to replace the current manner in which 'interconnection arrangements' are regulated on the Internet. As we all know, the Internet at present, is a network of networks, and a range of entities operate the multiple networks on which all Internet communications travel. At present, the flow of communications between these various networks is through settlement-free peering – where the networks simply exchange traffic without any payments to each other. Recently, ETNO proposed that the current arrangement be replaced with a 'new IP interconnection system' where the 'sending party network' pays in cases 'where appropriate'. The proposal also specified that national governments should play an active role in facilitating this new set of interconnection arrangements. Though the clause 'where appropriate' gives the proposal some ambiguity, its stress is on instituting a new 'sender pays' interconnection arrangement that would fundamentally alter the present nature of the Internet.

Defenders of the ETNO proposal have argued that it will enable carriers (telecom network operators) in generating much needed revenue to plough back into Internet infrastructural development. But at what cost? Not only is the proposition to generate a complex set of interconnection agreements an unwieldy one, it also adversely affects access to the Internet in the developing world.

As critics of the ETNO proposal have pointed out, "If sending networks have to pay termination fees to reach local telecom operators that serve businesses and individual users in less developed countries, large companies may decide that certain countries are not big or commercially important enough to justify the cost of routing traffic into that destination. … As carriers decline or limit interconnection with destinations deemed not worth the cost of termination fees, certain countries may find themselves on the wrong side of a worsening 'digital divide'. Citizens in those countries could face reduced ability or increased costs to access important content outside their countries' borders, global online markets and services, and powerful online tools they rely on for everything from political participation and organising to building their own local businesses and service[7]."

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7   For instance, see the critique of the Centre for Democracy and Technology at http://www.google.co.in/url?

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4. The future of political change hinges on mobiles; lets forget the broadband.

Mobile telephony has changed a lot for social protest. It has enabled flash mobs and made organised resistance possible on scale. While these gains are to be celebrated, it must not be forgotten that ICTs hold the potential to make a wide range of civic and political rights, a reality for women. The rights to information, to participate in the civic and public affairs of the local democracy, to shape local governance agenda, to raise questions, make claims and demand accountability from local, national and supra-national authorities and actors, get a new lease of life in the network age as digital artefacts become channels that can deliver informational and communicative power. This of course presupposes both basic connectivity infrastructure and innovation in governance systems that can adapt to new citizenship possibilities. The mobile would then be part of a larger ecosystem where public broadband connectivity and other community owned wireless systems can provide the foundations for schools, libraries, public offices, NGOs and other institutions to re-design their processes to deliver on their mandates. Such ecosystems can open up new opportunities for gender equality advocates and for grass-roots groups to influence local governance and democracy and to aspire for *de facto* citizenship. These far-reaching institutional changes to the public information and governance ecology would anchor ideas like open government in a wider democratic transformation where mobiles do have a role to play. However, the mobiles versus broadband argument creates a false dichotomy pitching the individual right to communicate against institutional restructuring in the network age. Both are important.

In fact, the broadband gap between the developed and the developing world may well be the missing debate in the political economy of telecommunications. Public financing in this area, especially in the poorest and small island countries is a dire need. Over time, both social and economic pay-offs are bound to emerge from the effective deployment of broadband infrastructure by local public institutions, markets and civil society. These can bring new gains for gender justice, provided women's groups and gender equality advocates can influence the discourse.

Also, a very important issue that the mainstream discourse on mobiles for political change skirts is that of net neutrality. Neutrality of the net is under threat as the rules governing the mobile Internet in most countries are different from those for the fixed Internet. The mobile Internet is entirely proprietary, and mobile network providers offer certain applications that are pre-loaded for free, locking-in users to certain digital environments. This of course is totally antithetical to the openness of the Internet but an extremely lucrative proposition for big business. Engaging with these agenda is important for gender equality advocates.

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sa=t&rct=j&q=what+is+the+ETno+proposal+&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDYQFjAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdt.org%2Ffiles%2Fpdfs%2FCDT_Analysis_ETNO_Proposal.pdf&ei=983nUNK3Es6fkgWUw4H4Ag&usg=AFQjCNFwMlGr8U67NFjukk8VUjYCLYFoow&bvm=bv.1355534169,d.dGI&cad=rja

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5. The core agenda for women's groups in the network age is to ensure that the 'informational state' does not violate the right to privacy.

Feminist groups have historically been alert to how patriarchal power is reconstituted through the apparatus of the state. They have therefore been wary of technology in the hands of the state, as technology often becomes a tool for consolidating existing state power. Feminists have focussed their attention on ICT initiatives of the state that encroach upon women's rights and freedoms — such as Saudi Arabia's remote tracking system of women travelling out of the country or the Brazilian government's move towards compulsory registration of all pregnancies in a national database that could potentially lead to the persecution of women who have an abortion.

It also needs to be understood that the information society, while reconstituting state power, also creates cracks in the edifice of democracy, upturning old equations and bringing power to the marginalised. An important arena for feminist engagement hence includes state-led initiatives that enable improved entitlements and service delivery to citizens through large scale data systems.

Box 7. ICTs for enhancing service delivery to marginalised groups — The case of Mission Convergence

Mission Convergence (http://www.missionconvergence.org/) is an initiative of the Government of Delhi that has attempted to set up an ICT-based, convergent, single window service delivery system, to meet the welfare needs of some of the most marginalised communities. The initiative has adopted an innovative government- NGO partnership model towards this, as explained below.

Firstly, a vulnerability survey was undertaken in the slums and other underprivileged neighbourhoods to prepare a comprehensive database of beneficiaries. Secondly, an ICT-based system was set up to enable convergence of over 40 welfare schemes that were previously handled by nine different departments, as well as processing and tracking of applications for entitlements. For the receipt of applications, the Government of Delhi decided to tap into a pre-existing network of Gender Resource Centres that were operational in slum communities and other disadvantaged pockets of Delhi. These Gender Resource Centres had been set up under an earlier government programme, and they were operated by NGOs. The rationale guiding this decision was that the NGOs operating the Gender Resource Centres were already sensitive to the local context and invested in addressing community needs — therefore, their involvement in service delivery would ensure smooth processing of information requests and entitlement claims. Also, NGOs by being rooted in the communities, offer the possibility of greater voice for citizens, in the implementation. To ensure that the NGOs running the centres do not become alternate power structures in the communities intermediating the state-citizen relationship, a monitoring mechanism with representation from the government as well as civil society organisations, has been instituted.

No doubt, civil society actors need to remain vigilant about how these systems are governed. There may however be new spaces for local organisations to open up the tall agenda of e-governance to those in the fringes, especially socially marginalised groups, to participate in constructing and even auditing these data systems so that social security benefits can be delivered in accountable ways. This is especially important as for the longest time, states have privileged the entitlement claims of male, propertied citizens and relegated women

and other underprivileged groups to the margins. ICT-enabled governance systems offer an unprecedented opportunity for making governance transparent, and if this is harnessed, marginalised groups can successfully exert their claims on the state. Therefore, a blanket disavowal of ICT systems in governance may be misplaced. For, if used in a creative and context-appropriate way, ICTs can facilitate in creating sound systems for public service delivery to citizens.

The attempt of this background note has been to bring conversations and research insights from the CITIGEN network (www.gender-IS-citizenship.net) of IT for Change, to spark off further discussion and debate on women's political participation and ICTs.