



Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society

An Asia-Wide Research Program

Coordinated by IT for Change

Call for Pre-Proposals

Deadline Extended to May 7th, 2010

Program Overview

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Rationale and Scope of the Program

In recent years, the arena of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has seen considerable engagement from scholars interested in gender perspectives. However, feminist studies focusing on gender and development are still evolving and are nascent in their attempts to build theoretical frameworks to grasp the wider techno-social context of the information society. The opportunities and challenges for women's equality and empowerment in the emerging context need to be framed in a nuanced way, juxtaposing the analysis of gender relations with the broader questions of development, participation and power. Such a theoretical canopy will need interdisciplinary work that can provide concepts not only for analysis, but also for action.

The proposed Program posits the notion of 'citizenship' as a conceptual lens to understand the way gender power works and can potentially shift on the macro-meso-micro continuum of the emerging information society context. The lens of citizenship seems appropriate for two reasons – it enables a study of the changing context of the rights, entitlements and agency of marginalised women as a social category in the emerging social relationships architecture effected by new technologies. More broadly, it also provides an entry point to interpret the contemporary through 'social' theories rather than only 'economic' ones that have held sway over the analysis of ICTs and development. Research in the African context, based on analysis of policy documents and project implementation, shows how economic approaches to ICTs pose a threat to the potential of the political and advocacy role of ICTs as effective means of civil society participation for women.¹

Further, mapping women's citizenship in the emerging context also allows a broadening of the conceptual horizon about gender and ICTs, towards a politicization and radicalization of the 'access-centred' discourse so that the core feminist question about power, justice and equity can be addressed in its full implications.

¹ Asiedu, Christobel (2006): "Information Communication Technologies, and Gender and Development in Africa". Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal Convention Center, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, Aug 10. Available online http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p103091_index.html, accessed on 17 Dec 2009.

The Program builds upon Southern feminist work on gender and development, existing scholarship in information society theory, and gender and ICTs literature. Its conceptual starting point is that when social structures are in flux and a new social order is formative, the historical context presents a critical space for realising gender justice. The information society canvas denotes a tension between authoritarian and democratic forces, wherein the potential for gains in terms of autonomy, democracy, justice, and a critical culture can materialise, depending on the social practices and institutional arrangements of the particular social context². This wider canvas of change is relevant to feminist intervention, which is 'essentially about completing the grand project of democracy and citizenship'.³

The Program, based on a tentative framework around citizenship, gender and the information society, will explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Multiple sites located across the overlapping realms of the post-national, national, sub-national/local and online spaces of the information society, will be studied for understanding whether and how women participate in these spaces and what the role of the broader institutional context is, and can be, in promoting their equal social membership in these spaces.

From search engines and their non-transparent architecture, and the entrenched gender biases of ostensibly open and collaborative platforms like Wikipedia, to the increasing oligopolistic corporatisation of the Internet, many new lines of enquiry have emerged to problematise new technologies, gender and women's citizenship. The Program will examine technological affordances⁴ in relation also to policy regimes, not only to critique existing policy perspectives shaping women's participation in the arena of ICTs and development, but also to propose policy frameworks for gender-equal outcomes.

Research Objectives

The overall objectives of the Program are as follows:

- To understand how emerging techno-social paradigms, shaped by new information and communication technologies, recast the citizenship of marginalised women.
- To examine the challenges to and opportunities for women's citizenship as they are shaped by new ICTs in relation to specific social and institutional ecologies.
- To propose ways forward for practice and policy in relation to information and communication domains that place women's citizenship at the centre.
- To build a network of researchers, scholars, and policy makers on information society and gender issues in Asia.

Key Research Questions

Some indicative, key research questions proposed by this Program to build a theoretical framework on gender and citizenship in the information society are:

2 Benkler, Yochai (2006): "The Wealth of Networks - How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom ". New Haven and London : Yale University Press.

3 Sen, Gita (2006): "Feminist Politics in a Fundamentalist World", *Minerva*, vol.30, pp.16-18.

4 The concept of technology "affordances" offers a useful middle ground between determinist and social constructivist perspectives.

1. How does the trans-local nature of the public sphere being shaped by new information and communications technologies change the contexts and meanings of citizenship for marginalised women?
2. Within national and sub-national contexts, how do new technologies mediate women's substantive citizenship? How do citizenship practices, leveraging new technologies, challenge and redefine boundaries of women's formal citizenship in local contexts? How do new technologies enhance or otherwise affect institutional accountability as well as the participation of marginalised women in local governance?
3. How do women renegotiate gender and challenge local power structures by creating and shaping local publics using digital media?
4. What are the conceptual tools that enable us to understand how inclusion and participation on the Internet is gendered? For instance, how do we understand hegemonic masculinities in relation to the public sphere shaped by the Internet, particularly from the standpoint of marginalised women? How do we unpack and interpret the openness and/or publicness of the basic architecture of the Internet from a feminist perspective?
5. How do current regimes governing online spaces - content on the Internet, social networking sites, search engines etc. influence gender related outcomes? How do women's rights and citizenship get framed on the local-global information society continuum?
6. How do national policy frameworks shape technology appropriation by women for their social and political empowerment? For example, What kind of policies and institutional mechanisms are needed to support women's local media in the new digital environment? How do different policy approaches to knowledge – public domain, commons, commercial licensing, community ownership – impact women's appropriation of techno-social spaces? What are the interconnections between 'open ICT paradigms'⁵ and emancipatory feminist frameworks?

Research Approach

The Research Program will be based on feminist multi-disciplinary approaches to interpret women's citizenship in the information society. It will build upon the tentative framework suggested here as a starting point to politicise the gender and information society discourse, and through an inquiry of situated experiences of women (and men), it will attempt to build grounded theory.

The Program will focus on the experiences of marginalised women from developing countries in the Asian context. It will draw on a variety of methods and encourage analysis to build forward-looking epistemic models and develop connections across very wide conceptual terrains, to thereby evolve a broad theoretical framework that can then form the basis of more intensive inquiries in specific sub-domains. The final research output of the Program will revisit the core questions of this research endeavour, bringing the emerging concepts together within a theoretical canopy.

This Program will be relevant to feminist centres of learning and research, including women's studies departments, non-profit centres undertaking research for policy action, action research and global policy networks engaged in globalization and women's rights lobbying from a Southern feminist perspective, and activist-scholars.

⁵ Open source software, open content, open connectivity, open hardware, open spectrum etc.

Anticipated Outcomes

The Program aims to build a theoretical framework in the areas of information society and gender studies that will be relevant to policy and to further academic work in a field that is still nascent. It will actively and strategically network with the gender and development community at national and global levels, specifically addressing policy makers, donor institutions and activist networks. It will come out with a book that will be under an open content license.