

SESSION IV: What matters in building feminist power through technologies

The session reflected upon the way power relationships are inscribed in the autonomous course of the 'digital everyday'. It then engaged with the question of how technology can be appropriated to serve a collective feminist consciousness and what would be the way to make this happen.

Power speeches delivered by:

Gayatri Buragohain, Executive Director, Feminist Approach to Technology, India

Jan Moolman, Women's Rights Projects Coordinator, Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme, South Africa

Aparna Kalley, Project Coordinator, Prakriye – Centre for Community Informatics and Development, IT for Change, India

Anchor: Geetanjali Misra, Executive Director, CREA, India

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Geetanjali Misra began the session with a mention of the book 'Feminism confronts technology' by Judy Wajcman. The writer argues that Western society casts technological competence as a masculine culture. Yet as we know, Geetanjali added, most people do not pay attention to the workings of power in our everyday lives. So, from the very moment we say 'Women weave, men till' to the questions of ICT access, we experience gender divisions every single day.



Geetanjali Misra

It is increasingly becoming evident that there are gender differences in the sphere of technology. Stereotypes of women's technical incompetency persist. It is also becoming clear that men's monopoly over technology is an important source of their power. This lack of technological power is a major cause of women's dependence on men. It also causes women to be denied learning opportunities in the technological sphere.

But the news is not all that bad. For, as we have heard at this meeting, women and women's organisations are indeed campaigning for technologies in their struggles for sexual and reproductive rights, health and so on. For example, women's campaign around sexual rights involves the question of their access to reproductive technologies. Moreover, even within these struggles, women are exploring the opportunities technology has opened up.

This session, will look at the opportunities

technology has opened up for women.

Gayatri Buragohain - Executive Director, Feminist Approach to Technology, India

Gayatri began by outlining three aspects relating to feminist power and technology:

1. The need to explore the new opportunities ICTs open up for feminist activism.
2. The need to explore the opportunities that technologies offer for the economic and social empowerment of women (recognising that feminist visions of empowerment are different from that of state and capitalist actors).
3. We, as women and as feminist actors, need to be present actively in the spaces where technological structures of governance get shaped.

She elaborated on points one and two based on her own engagement in the ICTs space. Very often, state led and state-NGO led programmes for using ICTs for empowerment of women, focus on ICT skills training for education and livelihoods. But as feminists, we know that education and livelihood cannot be the goal of an empowerment process. In this case, ICTs for empowerment programmes, to fulfil their mandate, would need to enable women to critically question the structures which shape women's technological access and their position in the techno-social.



Gayatri Buragohain

Of course, some feminist organisations are attempting to do this. Even FAT has attempted it. Yet one of the biggest obstacles encountered is women's fear. This fear does not arise from their literacy status, caste or class backgrounds. It is a gendered fear. Whether it is grassroots women or those of us who are implementing programmes, there is a fear of technology. The question we need to ask is how can we analyse this fear?

Consciously helping women overcome this fear of technology needs to be a part of ICTs training. Community radio and community video are very suited to enable grassroots women to overcome their fears of technology. This also helps overcome the illiteracy and language barriers argument put up by those who are unconvinced about ICTs for grassroots empowerment.

One must simultaneously though, caution against an over-optimism in social media in hastening community empowerment processes. We need to recognise that these processes are not simple.

Gayatri ended with a few points on feminist power and technology:

1. As feminist technologists and as feminist academics, we need to be conscious that our language does not alienate, and disempower women unfamiliar with the vocabulary we use.
2. We need to be active in the arenas where discourses around the new spaces technology has created are being shaped, and also be conscious of the technologies we are building.

Jan Moolman - Women's Rights Projects Coordinator, Association for Progressive Communications, Women's Networking Support Programme, South Africa

Jan began by saying that when we raise the issue of what matters in feminist power and technology, she felt, it was everything. We need to be cognisant of the challenges women face in accessing technological spaces.

Over the last few years, especially in Africa, violence against women, even in technological spaces is a major concern. We find many women withdrawing from the spaces technology has

opened up because of the threat of violence. She then brought out some examples of this threat of violence.

Everyone is aware of the threat of manipulation of images and cyberstalking. A peculiar case in Africa is, where communities have access to mobile phones in a widespread manner, and most of these phones have Internet enabled on them. In South Africa, a website was launched recently where communities had specific platforms where they could 'out' the gays and lesbians in their midst, and freely name them. For instance, this website would enable discussions such as "I saw my neighbour S.. kiss a girl. What kind of woman is she?" In communities where sexual minorities are isolated and have no help, you can imagine the oppression such a website would end up causing.

Secondly, she stressed upon how digital spaces continue to be dominated by the same old interests that control women's bodies. Thirdly, she stressed upon how in the digital spaces, even the technical structures need feminist attention. For example, ICANN is proposing a domain name .fam which Opus Dei is interested in. One can imagine the power of the Catholic groups who possess a 'family' domain name. We, as feminists, need to be conscious of this.

She also stressed upon the fact that feminist struggles to appropriate technology have to be locally embedded. Work that is cognisant of local politics and power structures need to be supported. This is what APC does. For instance, APC has a project in Cambodia that supports a feminist group using walkie talkies. Or in another case it supports sex workers in Uganda using SMSes to warn each other of abusive clients. So the choice of technology is itself dependent on local contexts.

To end with she focussed on some issues for feminist ICT activism. One important thing we need to focus on is whether we are perpetuating violence on digital platforms every time we forward a video of a woman being abused, or assaulted. Of course, the intentions are good, but does that justify what we are doing?

The other thing to watch out for is our own safety. For instance, we need to be aware of the



Jan Moolman

geo-locational tags on cellphones which makes it easy for the state to spot cyberactivists.

Finally, she said that there was a need to confront the tensions within our own feminism. As one colleagues at APC put it, "The sexed body in a networked context is at the same time a body that is material, discursive and digitised. If my partner takes a clip of me in an act of sexual intimacy and puts it online, it shifts both the context and the encounter that had taken place. So it is not only a violation of my privacy, but also of my bodily integrity". These are the conversations we need to encourage.

Aparna Kalley - Project Coordinator, Prakriye - Centre for Community Informatics and Development, IT for Change, India

Aparna spoke about the *Prakriye* ICT initiatives in Mysore, over the past six years. As is evident, communities tend to appropriate technology in a



Aparna Kalley

manner that suits existing patriarchal power structures. Market forces and power structures tend to collude with each other in re-enforcing ways. Within this broader context, how can women appropriate technologies? That is what the project has attempted to explore.

For over four and a half years, *Prakriye* has engaged in local radio, local video in the community, with women's collectives. From their experience, it was found that these initiatives have slowly shifted the information architectures in the communities, giving women a greater role in them.

We know that access to technology is an issue, but access itself cannot solve the issue of ensuring a democratisation of technology ownership and use. At IT for Change, she said, we are cognisant of this as well as the many dimensions of ownership. We recognise that ownership also includes a component of women's emotional and intellectual participation in actively shaping the medium, and not only technical training. The *Prakriye* initiative, has tried to help women use video and audio to express themselves, and to address issues at the familial and community level.

When women shared their videos with the men in the community, initially it was difficult to find acceptance for their work. This was built over time. Similarly, women used the radio space to talk about issues such as domestic violence in the community. Thus, video and radio were used by women in their struggles against localised patriarchies. Radio and video give the women a new legitimacy in their struggles.

Aparna outlined how the approaches in *Prakriye's* ICT initiatives enabled local power shifts to happen:

1. Firstly, we need to trust in existing community processes and work in tandem with on-going development interventions. ICTs by themselves have no transformatory power, it is the processes of democratisation they adopt that are significant.
2. In the new democratic communication processes we have initiated, new spaces for communication have opened up for women. There are also new collectivities emerging, where older women feel the need to support the younger women and girls in their villages to shape their lives.

Discussion:

Srilatha made some observations. We always talk about women's empowerment as a slow process but we should remember that patriarchy is thousands of years old, and in the light of that, what we do is rapid. Secondly, in terms of the possibilities technology opens up for women, in *Mahila Samakhya*, the real impediment to literacy is writing, not reading and technology can help in these areas. Thirdly, drawing a parallel with the struggle of feminists in the 1980s to redefine rape, we need to bring back the question of defining what constitutes a violation in the technology space, and not just consent.

Geetanjali Mishra added by asking - who would define the violation? That question is important too. Some people might feel violated by seeing a woman in sleeveless clothing. Who decides there has been a violation? We need to complicate this debate.

Shakun mentioned an incident from Vimochana's work where a 12 year old girl's photo was put up

on the net by her neighbour, along with her brothers' phone number. People started calling up. The family could not even figure out what was happening, and it was only after they approached a group like Vimochana that they knew the number was on the Internet. In such a context, where is the question of consent?

Graciela made an observation relating to women's absence in the technological spaces. She drew attention to the fields of archaeology and history which reveal that women did play a role in creating new technologies at all points of time but these stories have been obscured by mainstream history.

Oi Wan noted that as feminists we should actively dialogue to create safe online spaces for women, even if this means fist fighting with the powerful.

Desiree Lewis observed that often we notice that women from the South are portrayed as suffering victims by media as it suits their interests and

this fits into the developmentalism discourse. How are organisations dealing with this?

Gayatri replied by saying this was indeed a challenge. In activism we have to decide when we are merely forwarding violence against women stories in a non-useful manner and take a call.

Jan added that in APCs 'Take back the tech' campaign they tried to dissuade partners from posting actual evidence of online violence, but it was difficult to convince them.

Anita Gurumurthy added that we must remember that privacy is not just a concern related to the fear of surveillance. It is a precondition of the development of a political subjectivity and the access to safe spaces. The question of censorship is really a question of 'norm setting'. Who sets the norms today? Should it be the online corporations? How can states deal with this today?