



## State of the Art

# Influence of new media in negotiating citizenship rights of marginalised women in Bangladesh

Ananya Raihan  
Bangladesh

Coordinated by



Supported by



The **Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society** (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or as an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Six research partners from Sri Lanka, Philippines, China, Thailand/Taiwan, Bangladesh and India are studying various aspects of the terrain. Also eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan, Thailand, South Africa and Germany, are writing think pieces delving into the research subject from their perspectives to further enrich the research process.

The **State of the Art** is an analysis of the current state of the field researched. It includes a literature review, based on the hypothesis developed in the research proposal.

### **Author**

**Ananya Raihan** is the Executive Director of D.Net (Development Research Network), a non-profit organisation that conducts research and runs action programmes for the integration of ICTs in the economic development processes in Bangladesh and beyond its geographic boundary. Raihan is also the E-Governance Adviser to the Access to Information Programme at Prime Minister's Office, and has consulted and conducted research projects for a range of national, regional and global organisations including the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, UNCTAD, UNICEF, OXFAM and UNESCO. A social entrepreneur, Raihan developed the 'Pallitathya Model' to improve access to knowledge and information among poor and marginalised communities. He also advanced the concept of 'Benefit on Investment' (BOI) to understand and capture the sustainability dimension of public access to technology. Raihan was awarded the Ashoka Fellowship in 2004 in recognition of his contribution as a social innovator in this field.

Influence of new media in negotiating citizenship rights of marginalised women in Bangladesh

Ananya Raihan

2011

Published by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India

CITIGEN Asia Research Programme 2010-2012

The programme is coordinated by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India ([www.ITforChange.net](http://www.ITforChange.net)) and carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada (<http://publicwebsite.idrc.ca/EN/>)

CITIGEN Asia Research group outputs are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

More information on [www.gender-IS-citizenship.net](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net)

## Table of Contents

1.Context .....	1
2.ICTs landscape.....	5
3.Women’s citizenship and new media.....	8
4.Linkinɡ women's citizenship and new media.....	12
5.The research questions.....	13
6.Conclusion.....	18
References.....	20

## 1. Context

The study explores new media's contribution in creating both discourses on women's rights as citizens, and possibilities for marginalised women to renegotiate these rights in their local contexts in Bangladesh. It aims at understanding the level and extent of marginalised women's participation in creating these discourses through new media.

Bangladesh is an independent country which emerged on the world map after its liberation from Pakistan in 1971. It is a small member of the South Asian nations surrounded by India and Myanmar. The size of the country is 1,47,570 square kilometres. The population is 142.3 million, with a sex ratio of 110.3 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2011<sup>1</sup>). The economy of the country is growing at an average rate of 5% since 2001. During the last three years, the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was around 6%. The GDP of the country in 2010-11 was USD 79 billion and the per capita Gross National Product (GNP) was USD 499 in 2007-08 (Ministry Of Finance, 2008). Bangladesh has also transformed into a trade dependent nation from an aid dependent one (Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), 2003). It has experienced a reduction in poverty on one hand, and an increase in the inequality among the rich and the poor, on the other. According to Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) 2010, the head-count rate or incidence of poverty using the upper poverty line, reduced to 31.5% (35.2% rural and 21.3% urban). The corresponding rates for HIES in 2000 were 40% (43.8% rural and 28.4% urban). Poverty gap (depth of poverty) and squared poverty gap (severity of poverty) have also declined in 2010 in comparison to the status in 2005. Using the upper poverty line, the poverty gap was estimated at 3.1% in 2010, recording a 1.5 percentage point reduction over 2005. Similarly the squared poverty gap declined to 0.8% in 2010 from 1.3% in 2005 (BBS, 2011<sup>2</sup>). The Gini co-efficient, a measure to assess income inequality, also shows a decrease from 0.467 in 2005 to 0.458 in 2010, mostly because of decreasing rural inequality.

The overall human capacity building is a major issue for a huge population of 145 million. The literacy rate is 47.9%, whereas female literacy is lower at only 41.4%. Almost two-thirds (73.83%) of the population is either uneducated or has only basic education. Bangladesh is a young nation with more than half (57.72%) of the population under 25 years of age, the share of senior citizens (over 60 years) is only 6.22%. Male population in the country is greater in number ( 51.89%) than the female population (48.11%). Majority of the population lives in rural areas (76.19%). Islam is

---

1 For more information see: <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/BBS/PHC2011Preliminary%20Result.pdf> , 7 October 2011.

2 For more information see: <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/HIES/HIES-PR.pdf> , 7 October 2011.

the dominant religion in the country with 89.58% of the population belonging to the Muslim community. Other than Muslims, there are Hindus (9.34%), Buddhists (0.62%) and Christians (0.31%) (BBS, 2011). Other religions cover indigenous people, who are being deprived of mainstream development. One trend worth mentioning is that the share of population belonging to minority religions is decreasing. This is due to a higher population growth rate among Muslims. Ethnically, Bangladesh is homogeneous with a small presence (2%) of indigenous people (both in plain land and hill tracts).

Bangladesh is a secular democracy and most of the laws are laid on democratic, secular principles. More than 90% of the laws that we deal with in our everyday life, are secular and uniform. Equal rights for all men and women in every sphere of life have been guaranteed in clauses 10, 19 (1,2), 27, 28 (1,2,3,4), 29 (1, 2, 3-A) of Bangladesh's Constitution. There is no religious difference in the civil and criminal laws. However, the same is not true for family laws. Family laws are not brought under the Uniform Civil Code to address differences (Gayen, 2011).

While the research aims to understand the influence of new media on women's citizenship, it is important to understand the state of the art of the polity and context through a short review of literature. This literature review covers writings on women related policy, their participation in politics and women's empowerment.

Bangladesh was one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978, three years after the First World Conference on Women in Mexico. It is one of the 160 countries that signed its commitment to the said Convention. In 1984, Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with reservations on Articles 2, 13.1[a], 16.1[c] and [f]<sup>3</sup>, on the basis of religious sentiments. The collective efforts of women activists were successful in urging the government to withdraw its reservation on articles 13 [a] and 16.1[f]. The article related to rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship, and adoption of children or similar institutions is not ratified yet, which also holds ratification of overarching Article 2 (AWORC, 1998).

---

3 Article 2. States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women.

Article 13.1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in other areas of economic and social life in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:

[a] The right to family benefits.

Article 16.1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

[c] The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution;

[f] The same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship, and adoption of children, or similar institutions where these concepts exist in national legislation; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount.

A revised 'National Women Development Policy 2011' was approved by the government in March, 2011 but contained ambiguous language on provisions for the equal share of women in property and their opportunity in employment and business, which is closely related to the issue of CEDAW article 16[f]. The policy was the revival of the 1997 Women Development Policy, to the fulfilment of an election pledge by Awami League with dilution of clauses related to property rights. The 1997 policy was formulated during the previous tenure of the party. While the policy is a manifestation of the eagerness to ensure equality of women's rights at the political level, the society, dominated by male chauvinism and misinterpretation of religion, denies such a right. More importantly, the ruling party, subsequently retreated and the relevant minister interpreted the NWDP as 'not a law' and said it did not affect inheritance laws.

Participation is an important element of citizenship. Participation is a development approach, which recognises the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their well being. The strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in the development discourse. Norman Uphoff (cited in Khan, 1993: 111) identified four main kinds of participation, which are distinct but interrelated. They are as follows:

- (a) Participation in decision making, in identifying problems, formulating alternative planning activities, allocating resources etc;
- (b) Participation in implementation, in carrying out activities, managing and operating programmes;
- (c) Participation in economic, social, political or other benefits individually or collectively; and
- (d) Participation in evaluation of the activity and its outcomes for feedback purposes.

The participation of women in politics is promoted pro-actively by the political system. In the national assembly, 45 seats are reserved for women and the women representatives are nominated by the parties elected in the parliament proportionate to their respective number of seats. There is no direct voting in the reserved seats. The provision of reserved seats is maintained for the reason that patriarchal societies generally do not consider women as political representatives. Nevertheless, the situation is improving. For example, in the last election held in 2008, 19 women politicians won the seat in the parliament through direct voting, which is very significant compared to the previous election held in 2001.

The participation of women in lower echelons of power is also ensured through legal provisioning. For example, In *Upazilla Parishad* (sub-district) election, one chairperson and two vice-

chairpersons are elected through direct voting, where one vice-chairperson position is reserved for women. Moreover, women candidates can also contest in all other positions. In the lowest tier of local government, the *Union Parishad*, for each three member position, one position is reserved for women.

The Local Government (*Union Parishad*) Second Amendment Act 1997 created this opportunity for ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. This amendment provided for direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections. This was done as a strategy of affirmative action for providing the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making and this provided an opportunity to bring women to the centre of local development and generate new grass-roots level leadership.

Women's representation in all the elections held before and after 1997 may be observed in Table 1. The table shows that the affirmative action has increased the participation of women in political decision making through the electoral process. While representation of women was abysmally low before the amendment in laws of local government in 1997, such participation shows significant rise. In 1997, the women members in *Union Parishad* increased from only 20 to 12,882. Interestingly, number of directly elected women representatives also increased from 8 in 1992 to 23 in 1997. In the case of members, the number increased from 20 to 110.

**Table 1. Women's participation in political system: Before and After 1997**

<i>Elections</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Women candidates</i>		<i>Elected Women</i>
		<i>Chairman</i>	<i>Member</i>	<i>Chairman</i>
1 <sup>st</sup>	1973	1	-	1
2 <sup>nd</sup>	1977	19	19	4
3 <sup>rd</sup>	1984	-	-	6
4 <sup>th</sup>	1988	79	863	1
5 <sup>th</sup>	1992	115	1135	8
6 <sup>th</sup>	1997	102	43969/456*	20+3
7 <sup>th</sup>	2003	232	43764/617*	22
8 <sup>th</sup>	2011			

Source: Khan and Ara, 2006

Despite this quantitative shift in women's representation, in both national and local government, the



women representatives became a marginalised community in male-dominated councils. A common complaint regarding women's reserved seats is that the law does not specify what their roles and responsibilities are to be. Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice impacts the lives of women in different ways wherever they are. Patriarchal attitudes become so embedded that they are taken as natural (Khan, and Ara, 2006).

Empowerment is perceived as redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups or nations. Empowerment means the transformation of structures of subordination, through radical changes in law, property rights, control over women's labour and bodies, and the institutions that reinforce and perpetuate male domination (Batliwala, 1993: 5). Although the Constitution guaranteed equal rights for women, the reality is that they are not seen as equal and their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities only. At the same time women are considered as unfit to perform political and community affairs.

## **2. ICTs landscape**

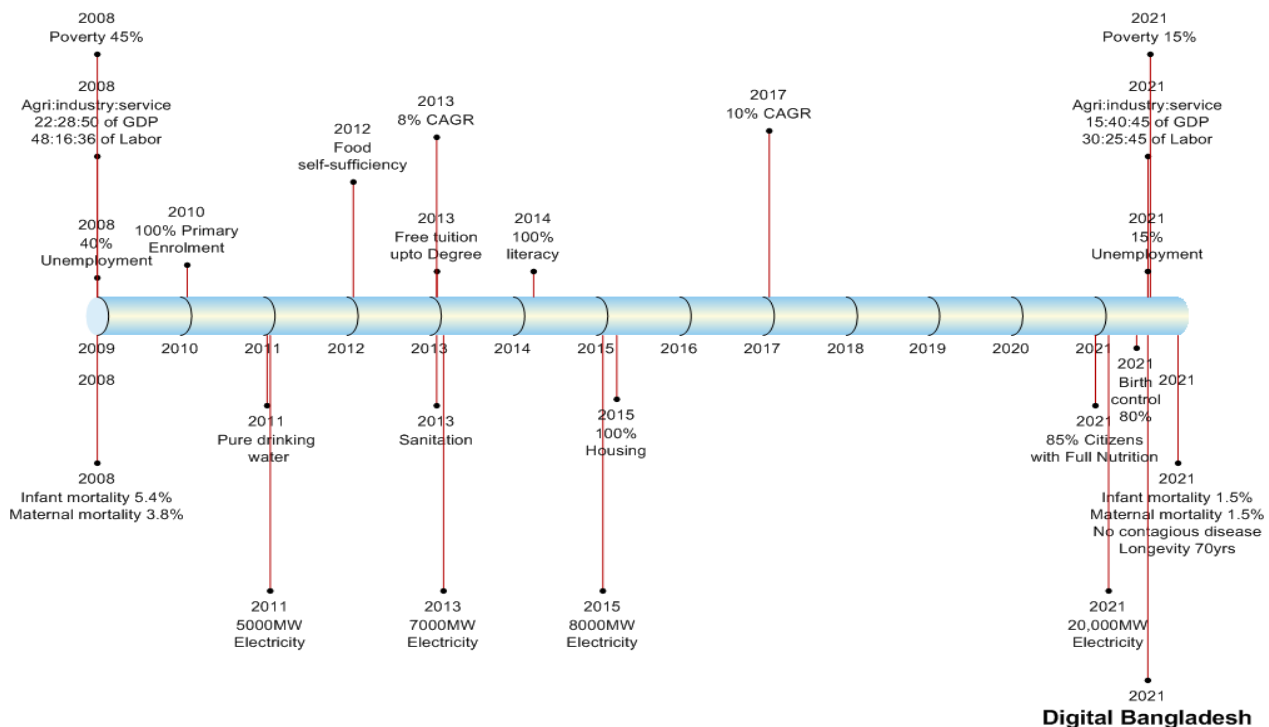
The announcement of the Vision 2021 of 'Digital Bangladesh' in 2009 had a transformational effect which has influenced all spheres of life. The key document of 'Digital Bangladesh: Strategic Priorities of Digital Bangladesh' lays emphasis on 'connecting citizens' and the e-governance strategy focuses on 'service delivery at the door-step'. The vision for 'connecting citizens' is that the citizens of the country irrespective of economic condition, education, race, ethnicity, profession, or gender are connected by a network of mobile communications, broadband Internet, audio-visual media through which information can be exchanged and services accessed (Access to Information (A2I), 2010). The Bangladesh National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy 2009 provides a framework, strategies and actions for the use of ICTs in Bangladesh's development efforts. The vision is to "expand and diversify the use of ICTs to establish a transparent, responsive and accountable government [and] enhance social equity and ensure cost-effective delivery of citizen-services through public-private partnerships". The action plan aims to implement ten strategic objectives over 18 months to 10 years. This programme is expected to strengthen implementation in two of the ten objectives identified in the policy, focusing on empowering women as agents of change in the implementation of the National ICT Policy. The objectives are to advance, *firstly*, social equity, gender parity, equal opportunity and equitable participation in nation-building through facilitating access to and motivation to use ICTs, *secondly*, the transformation of public services through open government and citizens' access and right to public information (as proscribed in the Right to Information Act 2009), with a view to increase transparency, accountability, responsiveness and higher efficiency in the delivery of citizen services. The strategic

priorities document also set a roadmap towards realising Vision 2021 (Figure 1).

Although the transformational change through ICTs was taking place predominantly through the private sector and NGO initiatives, the agenda for Digital Bangladesh had a strong impact on the government and government led programmes are creating visible changes in the ICTs landscape.

Owing to the exemption of tax on imported computers, the computer penetration in Bangladesh has grown rapidly. However, due to a low benchmark, the penetration rate is still low compared to other countries. The computer penetration is now 7.11 per 100 inhabitants, compared to 1.2 in 2005 (International Telecommunications Union (ITU), 2005 and 2007). The access to mobile telephone is growing exponentially due to appropriate competition policy and zero license fees within the National Telecom Policy of 2000. The current tele-density is 47%, combining mobile, fixed line and Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) penetration (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, 2011). The whole country is now covered with telecommunications network and anybody from anywhere can talk and browse the Internet through EDGE, GPRS and CDMA technology. The tax holiday for ICTs industry is pledged to be continued till 2018.

**Figure 1. Roadmap towards Realising Vision 2021: Digital Bangladesh**



**Source:** Access to Information Programme, 2011

The connectivity scenario in the country has improved after it got access to the large-capacity

optical-fiber submarine cable based information highway. A total 24 Gbps bandwidth is now available for use, however high price of Internet kept the facility underutilised. While penetration of mobile telephone observed phenomenal growth during the last one decade with 47% teledensity, the Internet penetration remains low. The mobile operators offer Internet connectivity across the country through EDGE, GPRS and CDMA technology, which allows the Public Access Venues (PAVs) in rural areas to offer Internet based services. Although the speed is not great for rich content, the access to Internet creates new business opportunities through the PAVs. However, the cost of connectivity is still a major concern which inhibits user growth of Internet and availability of high speed connectivity in the PAVs. The current price of 1 Mbps bandwidth is BDT 12,000 (approximately USD 170) per month, which was reduced in January 2011 from BDT 18,000. This reduction benefits Internet Service Providers (ISPs), however, at the user end there is no visible change in price for bandwidth (D.Net, 2011).

The 'service at the door step' approach under Digital Bangladesh agenda has brought a number of services on line or on mobile phone, as a result the PAVs are able to offer more services. Services like online passport application, stock trading, mobile banking, mobile remittance, birth registration are available through 4501 public access venues like union information and services centres (UISCs). However, such services are available only through the UISCs, which exclude private sector venues and create tilted playing field for public access venues. The issuance of IP telephony licence now allows PAVs to offer cheaper international calling service.

The national budget for 2011-12 and the Sixth Five Year Plan main-streamed ICTs in all sectorial development plan, rather than limiting it only in one chapter of the plan. Online-payment system, alternative sub-marine cable, review of ICT policy, streamlining coordination of ICTs related activities, action plan with appropriate budgetary allocation for implementation of ICTs roadmap and e-Government roadmap, implementation of 'quick-win' projects, tax incentive for channelling resources for the expansion of the network of PAVs, enactment of appropriate Right to Information Act, Licensing of Wi-MAX technology, mobilisation of USO fund for rolling out network in rural areas and expansion of network of PAVs, designing specialised curriculum for training of manpower required for PAVs - pave the way for building an inclusive information and knowledge system.

Digital content has become a major issue, as the PC penetration and Internet access have increased across the country. In a country, where illiteracy is very high and majority of the people cannot read in any language except Bangla, it is not enough just to create PAVs. There is a need for an effort to create local language content relevant to the citizens of the country. Private sector, social enterprises, NGOs and civil society organisations play an important role in creating local language

content. Access to Information (A2I) programme at Prime Minister's Office has created an online repository of Bangla language content by pulling content from the content producers in Bangladesh. The content repository titled '*Jatyo e-Tothyo-Kosh*' ([www.etothyokosh.org.bd](http://www.etothyokosh.org.bd)) is going to be developed further through the formation of a new institution.

### **3. Women's citizenship and new media**

New media have been recognised by world leaders as a key development enabler during the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005 (Tunis Commitment). Since then several institutions have started work in the area of new media for poverty alleviation. *Grameen Phone*, BRACNET.NET and D.Net are three prominent institutions working for new media in the rural areas. D.Net has developed a comprehensive volume of local language content on livelihood, making the Internet relevant to common people (Raihan and Habib, 2006). The online presence of the government for some sort of citizen services started with making the forms for obtaining various services available online in 2006<sup>4</sup>. The downloadable forms include passport application, visa application, citizenship form, pension form, Internet connection (BTTB), birth registration, income tax return, and driving license. The availability of these forms online helps citizens access government services in less time and minimises situations where they might have to bribe government officials. Now most of the government agencies have up-to-date websites and all district administration also have their own website with information related to government services including contact details of all government officials. The government also participates in the creation of public access to ICTs by establishing Union Information and Services Centres (UISC) in all 4501 *Union Parishad* premises. The UISC blog is playing a phenomenal role to make all the UISC managers accountable for making services available through the UISCs.

According to the European Commission Report (2009), to be an active and involved citizen, accessing and utilising communication is vital. New media facilitates the engagement of groups and individuals in government and community affairs, and thus promotes people's citizenship. The present government's last election manifesto to be 'Digital Bangladesh' by 2021 has been well received by the masses. Recent field experience suggests that a positive change has been noted with regard to women's access to computer and Internet. The incidence of enrolling girls in computer courses is increasing (Haque, 2001). Even in some cases girls' parents were found to be more interested in enrolling their daughters in computer courses compared to the parents of boys (D-Net, 2010: 41). Along with Government of Bangladesh, many national and international development agencies are working through different programmes to accomplish the idea of 'Digital Bangladesh'.

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information see: <http://www.forms.gov.bd>, 7 October 2011.

D. Net has initiated a programme which views the advent of new media as an opportunity of income generation for women. It provides a team of women an important role and a respectable livelihood as 'mobile lady' or 'info lady'. One clear impact of this programme has been the increase in self esteem. Several positive changes have been brought in the lives of the 'mobile lady'. They have a new socially accepted and respected identity. Simultaneously, while bringing positive change in the lives of marginalised and poor rural women, the women also expand their own knowledge base and are motivated to do better for themselves (Raihan, 2007). Research revealed that women in the village felt comfortable discussing their problems with these female mobile operators. Almost 30% of the female users had queries about health related issues. It is obvious that due to less mobility, they suffer from a lack of information. Therefore, the 'info lady' opens up a new arena for these poor marginalised women who can now share their problems. Thus, the long unexplored problems of the women are now captured with the help of 'info lady' and new media. Women have raised several queries regarding agriculture, as women were involved with home gardening. Some women (1.3%) raised concerns regarding their rights and entitlements.

In another study of D.Net (Shanmugavelan *et al.*, 2011) it was identified that the mobile phone is becoming popular among marginalised women for its multi-purpose services. In many health situations, both for the mother and the child, mobiles can be used to easily consult doctors and receive treatment and suggestions. Sometimes women feel shy sharing health problems face to face especially those related to their reproductive organs. Mobile phones successfully work in breaching this issue. Even within the political arena, women leaders use the mobile phone for campaigning. When the female political leaders apologise for not being able to visit the voters physically and ask for their support through the mobile phone, it works.

D. Net's research has also shown that new media helps women take decisions regarding both small and large purchases. When women want to buy a product from the market or street vendors/salesperson, on issues they are not familiar with, they take counsel from their friends, relatives or family members through the mobile phone. Women are primarily informed that domestic violence, violence against women, dowry, and early marriage etc are punishable crimes through different awareness and entertainment programmes on TV. Few of the respondents in the research also added that they know where legal services are available, if they are victimised. Thus, television programmes have played a role in women's legal literacy.

Nevertheless, investment still remains the biggest challenge both for the private sector led ICTs industry and ICTs for development. Government allocation for ICTs remains small and scattered. Addressing the gender dimension of access to information through ICTs is also a challenge. Men

represent 78% of all Internet users in Asia, while women account for only 22%. Even in the corporate world, women have less access to the Internet technology. As women represent almost half of the productive work force, we cannot ignore the issue of access to ICTs for this population group (Raihan and Hasan, 2006).

Yet within this grim scenario of discrimination, gender bias, traditional belief and marginalisation that impede women from using ICTs, there are several new initiatives that encourage and engage women to avail the enormous benefits of new media. 'Info lady' and 'Write 3' are such two invaluable initiatives from D.Net. It has used the concept of infomediaries and created the 'info lady'. The info ladies are currently working in 25 *Upazillas* within 18 *Zillas* of Bangladesh. They stand for women who have conquered all obstructions that patriarchy imposes on women. They are mobile, active, and confident enough to face any challenge. They are devoted to marginalised women, and help them assert their rights and entitlements as citizens. Thus, they challenge masculine mindsets, which view ICTs as predominantly within the male domain.

*Salma*, an info-lady from Babrijhar (Nilphamari), *Nayan*, from Mongla (Bagerhat) and *Selina* from Magura are proud of their profession. A country wide system of info-ladies can ensure direct employment of up to 80,000 rural women. Apart from employing women directly, the information provided by the helpline also directly addresses women's needs which are mostly related to economic empowerment. Women who availed the helpline service profess a higher self assessment and realisation of their potential and worth in society. Women even had increased incomes and increased authority over spending decisions (Raihan, 2007: 13). Due to their increased mobility, they are now more confident. Their pattern of work requires that they mix with different groups of people within the community, namely teachers, doctors and health officers, administrative officers, government officials, as well as NGO officials, development workers, legal officers, local leaders etc. This allows them to develop and create a strong network. With the income generated, along with supporting their family, some of the info ladies get admitted to higher education and started studying again. Accordingly, working as 'info lady' at D.Net empowered them in several areas: a) mobility, b) earn an income, c) become conscious users of ICTs and d) increase in status within the community.

Apart from self empowerment, these women support marginalised women's entitlements. They move from door to door to assist villagers to share their problems with the 'Help Desk'. They facilitate marginalised women to use ICTs in order to access government schemes / benefits. D.Net is developing content using which marginalised communities will be able to reap benefits from the Right To Information (RTI) Act 2009. The info ladies help people with the procedure to access these

benefits of the RTI Act 2009. The *infomediary* becomes the human interface between the knowledge base and the rural illiterate and print-disabled people. It is not desirable that the illiterate or ICTs illiterate community be deprived of the advantages of modern ICTs for accessing information and knowledge to improve their livelihoods. For instance, a farmer or an old person with asthma or a divorced housewife would hardly have any training to sit down with a keyboard and mouse and search for the information they are seeking. A farmer can describe her / his crops and ask for the current prices at different markets; the old person with asthma can describe the symptoms of her ailment and ask for locations, fees, and schedules of relevant doctors; the divorced housewife can explain her situation and ask for a possible support. In each of these situations, there is a need for a person who knows how to understand users' specific situation and find a solution in the *Jeeon-IKB* – in the websites, or contact experts at the help desk. This is precisely the role of the 'info lady' or information worker or knowledge worker, or *Infomediary* (Raihan *et al.*, 2007: 12).

Generally, traditional sources of information for women in villages are their husbands, mother, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, NGO workers or field workers from the department of health. The *Helpline* became an additional but very important source of information. The female users tend to develop a relationship with the 'info ladies'. The precondition of a successful relationship is trust. Thus, the 'info ladies' have not only become a source of information, but also a trustworthy person, with whom they can share their problems. Their 'female identity' makes rural women feel more comfortable in sharing their problems with them, many that were never uttered before (Raihan *et al.*, 2005).

At the *Helpline* women generally ask questions regarding health related problems, where they feel they are neglected and find *Helpline* as an important source of information for them. They ask questions regarding their skin, hair, STDs, birth control etc. While most women are eager to know about health related issues, they also ask for advice on child care. For instance, a woman who had been paralysed for twelve years, albeit has never been to a doctor, called the help desk for advice. Many women have questions regarding gynaecological problems. Women also accessed information about herbal treatments, medicines that villagers are entitled to for free from government and other sources. Information regarding specialist doctors, hospitals, process of engaging their services and price of their services, sanitation and cost effective technology for sanitation etc. are also enquired about. At the same time information on different threats that may occur due to HIV/AIDS and different methods of prevention are also in demand. Information regarding family law and legal rights, organisations providing legal aid services, lawyers and cost of services related to legal redress- are also sought by the women. The analysis of the calls shows that

women are mainly interested in health (46.1%) and non-farm activities (76.5%). Among the health related problems the calls from women were related to problems in the area of gynaecology (84.1%), and the rest were on eyes, medicine, and skin diseases. In addition, more than 56.3% women users called to know more about their legal rights (Raihan *et al.*, 2005: 47).

Mobilising and educating women to apply for information through the RTI Act 2009 using ICTs and exercising their rights, the info-ladies transformed the whole initiative from considering marginalised women merely as passive users and social adaptation to a stage of creating new technology meanings and new technology uses. Essentially, the investment is for a process of acculturation: not of the acculturation of the community to the information society possibilities but rather, of making ICTs and the Internet relevant to their needs (Gurumurthy, 2008: 7).

#### **4. Linking women's citizenship and new media**

The mainstream women's networks have achieved a lot in the last three decades to establish women's citizenship rights. A strong network of women's groups started advocacy at the national level, hoping to mobilise others to push for the implementation of CEDAW provisions in domestic legislation. A CEDAW Forum was formed and launched in 1992. It was composed of individuals and organisations dedicated to the women's cause and the implementation of CEDAW. Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), *Mahila Parishad*, and *Nari Pokkho* placed in the frontline the said Forum. With the help of the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), workshops, training, and CEDAW forums were conducted for different groups, from lawyers to journalists to ordinary citizens. These were to raise public awareness on how to incorporate the Convention, with emphasis on Articles 2, 13.1 [a], 16.1[c] & [f], into domestic laws.

A unified effort is more effective than several isolated approaches. The women learnt this after the success of their advocacy efforts. They were successful in urging the government to withdraw its reservation on articles 13 [a] and 16.1 [f]. The other provisions remain the top priority of women's organisations and NGOs in their lobbying and advocacy activities. Women have begun to be vigilant and participative in political decision-making. The government's action to consult with women's groups and activists for the preparation of the country report to CEDAW and the integration of CEDAW in domestic legislation proves that women's voices can no longer be ignored. This involvement in the law reform process is by far a great achievement for women. The effort has united women and other NGOs in articulating the promotion of women's equal rights.

The women activists groups are now attempting to mobilise a greater voice within both female and



male communities through new media, who are otherwise disconnected from the mainstream movements. Some initiatives like the 'info lady' utilises digital technologies as 'tools' for women's empowerment, recognising them as tools for 'capacity building to cope' and 'capacity building to transform' (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003: 4).

## **5. The research questions**

Feminist scholars view ICTs not as mere tools but as the basis for the construction of new social realities leading to considerable 'shifts in local gender norms' and hence possessing significant transformative potential (Gurumurthy, 2008: 6; Gurumurthy, Singh, Kovacs, 2008). The present research attempts to investigate the pathways and nature of such construction in the context of Bangladesh. The study explores the interplay of new and traditional media in constructing new identity, both personal and social vis-à-vis women's citizenship.

Taking cue from the scholars of democracy in the information age, the research would like to analyse the new ICTs platforms as alternative 'public sphere' spaces and whether they facilitate expansion or transformation of civic engagement and citizenship of women. In this context, it is clear that a gender focused democratic participation at the local level requires innovative strategies of building communities of interaction for representing women's articulations and knowledge in the emergent public sphere afforded by the new ICTs. The study strives to understand how the communities are being built and functioning.

The research questions are:

- a. How does new media influence marginalised women's decision making process regarding their citizenship rights?
- b. How does new media contribute to the discourse of women's political citizenship rights?
- c. To what extent does new media enable women to renegotiate citizenship rights in their local contexts – with respect to entitlement, information, decision making bodies?
- d. How to build and sustain a network of activists, scholars and women in general using new media for creating a new space for exercising citizenship?

To understand the current status of the presence of women and women related issues on new media, a short desk research was conducted on YouTube, Facebook and Blogs. The primary analysis shows

that there exists a potential for engaging women and social activists for the cause of transformational change through social media. The low penetration of computer based Internet and high penetration of mobile phone creates a ground to test whether it is possible to link mobile technology with online platform and subsequently with traditional media. The desk research to map participation of women in new media and also map topics related to women's citizenship shows presence of a significant variety of topics related to women's citizenship. This finding provides basic ground to explore creation of an exclusive platform for mobilisation of opinion and sharing experiences among activists, scholars and policy makers and ultimately ordinary women. The findings of this preliminary search are presented below.

**Youtube:** Search using a set of key words and phrases gave a result of 2250 videos available on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), the most popular website for posting videos<sup>5</sup>. Initially, the key words were selected through key informant debriefing. The key informants are women activists, who deal with various issues of women rights. Then, search was run for each of the key words. Table 1 shows the number of videos identified for each of the key words.

**Table 1. Distribution of Video on Women Issues**

<b>Category</b>	<b>No.</b>
<i>Empowerment</i>	93
<i>Entertainment</i>	59
<i>Life style</i>	53
<i>Religious conflict</i>	53
<i>Education</i>	45
<i>Women rights</i>	39
<i>Micro credit involvement</i>	31
<i>Health</i>	30
<i>Liberation</i>	28
<i>Violence</i>	28
<i>Sexual Harassment</i>	26
<i>Economic Involvement</i>	24
<i>Technology</i>	23
<i>Religion</i>	21

5 The YouTube search was conducted during August-September, 2011.

<i>Politics</i>	19
<i>Professional Success</i>	14
<i>Personality</i>	11
<i>Governance</i>	10
<i>Climate Change</i>	7
<i>Profession</i>	7
<i>Agriculture</i>	6
<i>Achievement</i>	5
<i>Poverty Alleviation</i>	5
<i>Acid Violence</i>	4
<i>Spiritual Practice</i>	4
<i>Policy</i>	3
<i>Gender Inequality</i>	2
<i>Leadership</i>	2
<i>Others</i>	81

Most of the videos are regarding the empowerment of women (93). Additionally, the videos are on entertainment, life style of women, religious conflict regarding *hijab* and women's rights, education, micro credit involvement, health, liberation, violence, sexual harassment, economic involvement, technology, politics (political involvement and politics of women's rights), professional success, personality, governance (election and policy implementation), climate change, agriculture, achievement (Award), poverty alleviation, acid violence, spiritual practice, gender inequality, leadership and others. Most of the videos were uploaded by NGOs, INGOs, journalists and news agencies. The analysis shows that women rights activists are aware of some forms of new media and find them useful for sharing ideas, propositions and endeavour to provoke civic actions.

**Blogs:** In many cases, it is quite difficult to know the identities or sex of the bloggers. Bloggers often use pseudonym or fictitious names to post. In many cases, women were seen using pseudonym to hide their sex as blogging in a patriarchal society can be challenging. However, there are few known women bloggers in Bangladesh whose blogging profile can provide a snapshot of women's blogging in Bangladesh<sup>6</sup>. Here are some insights from a quick review:

<sup>6</sup> Following blogs were reviewed for this write-up (7 October 2011):  
**Sachalayatan** (<http://www.sachalayatan.com/fstulip>; <http://www.sachalayatan.com/mehbuba>;

1. Male dominated blogging: The random survey of major Bangladeshi blogs suggests a very low ratio of women bloggers compared to their male counterparts. While for the English blogs ('Unheard Voice'), the male-female ratio of active bloggers is almost equal, for most Bangla blogs however there is only one female blogger for 10 or more male bloggers. In some community blogs, the ratio is prejudiced against women.
2. Gender inequality as a major theme: Gender bias of the society is reflected in the themes chosen by women bloggers. Whether writing a political piece or a mere daily journal, they often tend to highlight their unequal social position in the patriarchal society. This trend is more prominent in blogs such as Somewherein, AmarBlog, etc.
3. Human rights and political issues: Some female bloggers are devoted to national and international human rights issues. Their areas of interest range from human rights abuse in Chittagong Hill Tracts to various internal political movements. This trend is more prominent in 'Unheard Voice'. For example, women rights and ethnic minority can be found on Hana shams Ahamed, Tibet's human rights movement on Wasfia's blog, social awareness issues on Sumaiyaborkatullah's blog, strong political bias issues and wildlife related on Jsomaamar blog-Pakhirpechaly.
4. Literature: A number of female bloggers use the blog space to present their literary works such as poems and stories to the public. This is more prominent in blogs such as *Sachalayatan*.
5. Daily Journal: Many bloggers use the blog space as an online journal to share their personal experiences or as a tool for communication where they post questions/comments for others to respond.

**Facebook:** As of April 20, 2011 there are 1.42 million user accounts on Facebook, of which 26% accounts are owned by women (369,200). It was also interesting to find that 27,890 female users are outside of major cities.

---

<http://www.sachalayatan.com/tuli1>; <http://www.sachalayatan.com/ekakini>;  
[http://www.sachalayatan.com/monika\\_rashid](http://www.sachalayatan.com/monika_rashid))

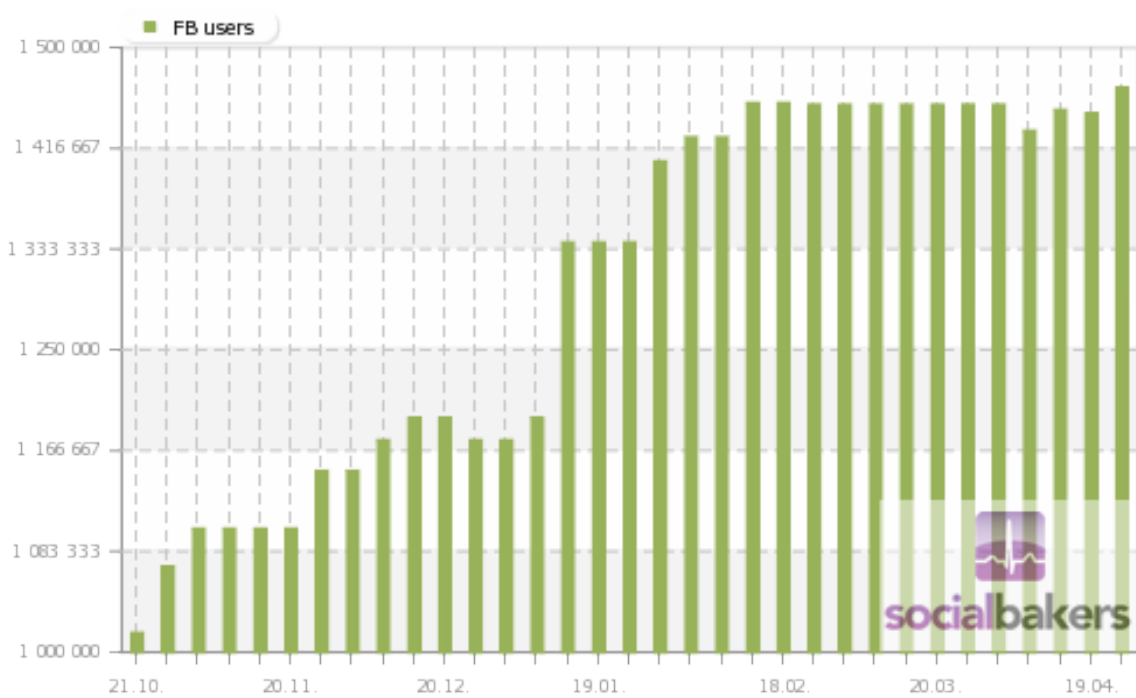
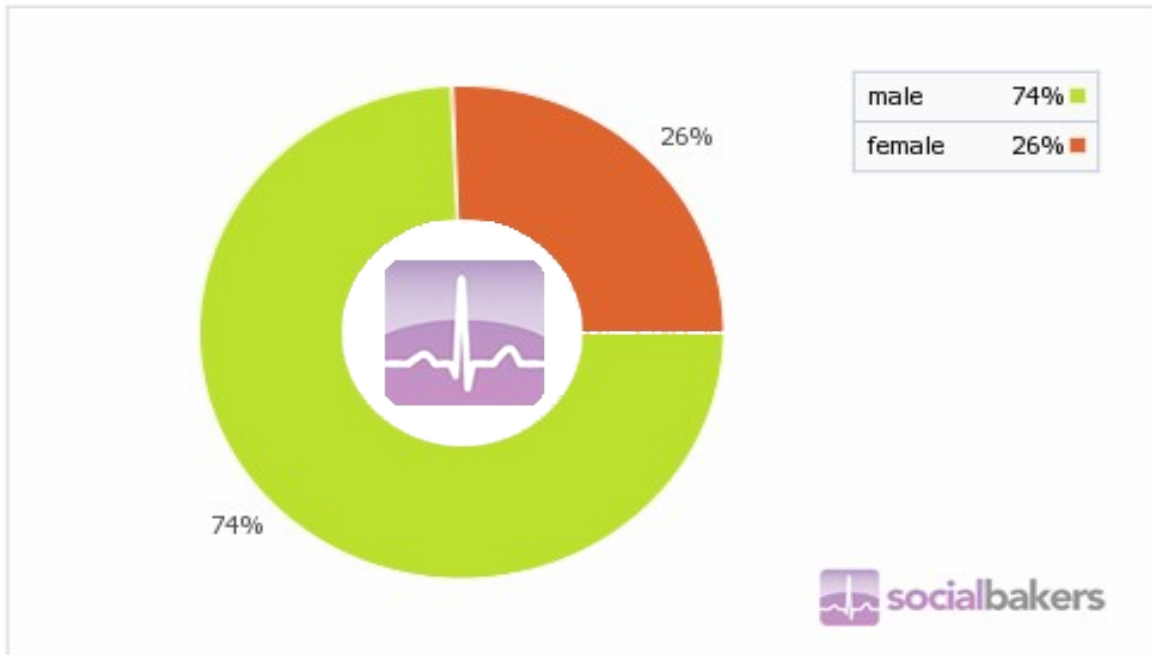
**Amarblog** (<http://smahbub.amarblog.com/>; <http://sabrina.amarblog.com/>; <http://sumaiyabarkatullah.amarblog.com/>;  
<http://nuhan.amarblog.com/>; <http://shrabonti.amarblog.com/>; <http://jsoma.amarblog.com/>)

**Unheard Voice** (<http://unheardvoice.net/blog/author/hana/>; <http://unheardvoice.net/blog/author/wasfia/>)

**Amrabondhu** (<http://www.amrabondhu.com/tanbira>)

**Mukto Blog** (<http://www.muktoblog.com/blogger.php?un=fariarishta>)

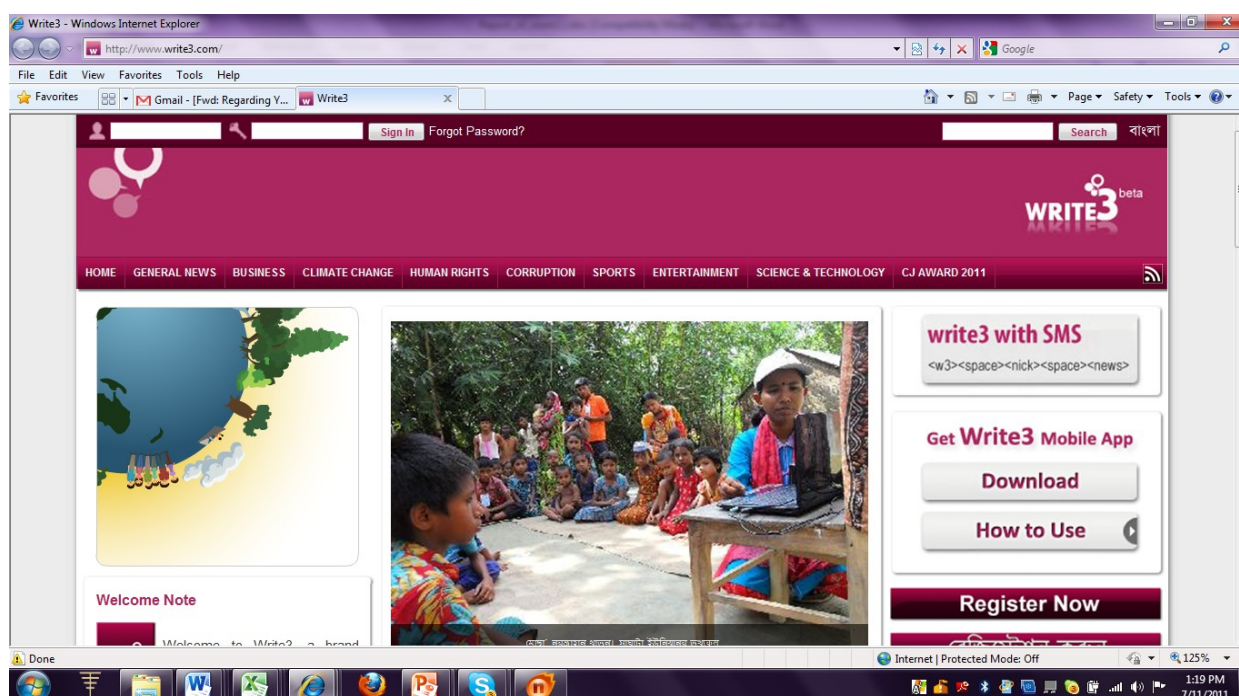
**Figure 1 and 2. Distribution of Facebook Users by Sex and trends in Growth of Facebook Users [ October, 2010 – April, 2011]**



The analysis provides a ground to explore ways to establish a platform on women citizenship with primary participation of women rights activists as well as citizens on various issues related to women's citizenship.

One of the innovative platforms [www.write3.com](http://www.write3.com) will be explored for hosting similar platforms [Figure 3]. The uniqueness of such a platform is it links web-based platforms with mobile phone, which will allow a large number of people to join the platform who might not have access to computer and internet.

**Figure 3. A screen shot of write3.com**



## 6. Conclusion

From the existing literature and empirical investigation of new media initiatives in Bangladesh, two points may be inferred:

1. To a great extent, people at the grassroots level in Bangladesh, are deprived of their rights, due to lack of information. Access to new media can facilitate relatively better information that ultimately leads to claims-making, especially by women.
2. Marginalised women have less access to new media, which holds the potential for their

access to political citizenship.

This, we feel, presents a strong justification for the need to build an exclusive platform for collaboration and opinion building on women citizenship issues. Our research will go on to explore how such a platform can be created and sustained, the participation of people in the platform and modalities of engagement of women activists and general citizens. Our idea is also to link the new media with traditional media for a wider reach of voices of women from the new platform.

## References

- Access to Information Programme (2010), *Strategic Priorities of Digital Bangladesh*, Retrieved from [www.a2i.pmo.gov.bd/tempdoc/spdbb.pdf](http://www.a2i.pmo.gov.bd/tempdoc/spdbb.pdf), 13 September, 2011.
- AWORC (1998), *CEDAW and Women: Bangladeshi Women*, Retrieved from [http://www.aworc.org/bpfa/pub/sec\\_i/hum00001.html](http://www.aworc.org/bpfa/pub/sec_i/hum00001.html), 13 September, 2011.
- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2005), *Data Collection and Dissemination of ICT Statistics: The Bangladesh Experience*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.
- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2011), *Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2010*, Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.
- Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (2011, September), *Press Release of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission*. Retrieved from [http://www.btrc.gov.bd/newsandevents/mobile\\_phone\\_subscribers/mobile\\_phone\\_subscribers\\_july\\_2008.php](http://www.btrc.gov.bd/newsandevents/mobile_phone_subscribers/mobile_phone_subscribers_july_2008.php), 03 September, 2011.
- Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (2006, September), *Press Release of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission*. Retrieved from <http://www.btrc.gov.bd>, 13 September, 2006.
- Centre for Policy Dialogue (2003), 'Revisiting Foreign Aid: An Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development', in *Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development*, Dhaka: Bangladesh. CPD. Retrieved from <http://www.cpd-bangladesh.org/work/irbd2003.html> , 31 August, 2008.
- D.Net (2009), *Bangladesh: Empowering women through ICTs*, Dhaka: D.Net.
- Gayen K. (2011, May), 'Equal Property Right: Much Ado about Nothing', in *Forum, Monthly of the Daily Star*. Volume 5 (Issue 05). Retrieved from: <http://www.thedailystar.net/forum/2011/May/right.htm>, 10 September, 2011.
- Gurumurthy A., Singh P., Swamy M. (eds.) (2008), *Political economy of the information society. Information Society for the South Series, Volume 1*, Bangalore: IT for Change.
- Haque, S. (2001, October), 'Country Paper' *Asia Pacific Regional workshop on Equal Access of Women in ICT Seoul*. Retrieved from <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/gender/documents/Asia-PacificIWrkshopKorea/CntryReportBangladesh.pdf>, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2010.



- Khan M. R. , Ara F. (2006), 'Women, participation and empowerment in local government: Bangladesh Union Parishad perspective', in *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29 (Jan-Mar 2006), pp. 73-92.
- Khan N. A. (1993), 'Towards an Understanding of ‘Participatiuon’; The Conceptual Labyrinth Revisited', in *Administrative Change*, Vol.XX (Nos.1-2: July 1992-June), pp.106-120.
- Ministry of Finance (2008), *Budget (2008-2009) speech: Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*. Retrieved from [http://www.mof.gov.bd/mof2/budget/08\\_09/budget\\_speech/08\\_09\\_en.pdf](http://www.mof.gov.bd/mof2/budget/08_09/budget_speech/08_09_en.pdf), 22 August, 2008.
- Raihan A. (2010), *Adaptation of GEM Tool for Rural ICT Development Projects*, Dhaka: D.Net .
- Raihan A., Tanjin A., Hasan M. (2009), *Narir Jonno Projukti*, Dhaka: D.Net.
- Raihan A. et al. (2007), *Pallitathya, An Information and Knowledge System for the Poor and marginalised: Experiences from Grassroots in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: D.Net.
- Raihan A., Habib S.M.A. (2006), *Digital Review of Bangladesh: A Preliminary Exploration*, Occasional Paper, Dhaka: D.Net.
- Raihan A., Hasan M. (2006), *Millennium Development Goals in Bangladesh and Information and Communication technology*, Working Paper, Dhaka: D.Net.
- Shanmugavelan, M., Alam M., Raihan A. and Schoemaker E. (2011), *Mobile Phones for Millennium Development Goals*, Dhaka: D.Net.
- European Commission, Information Society and Media (2010), *Women in ICT*, A European Commission Report 2009.