



**State of the Art**

**Engendering technology,  
modernising advocacy**

The limits and possibilities of the emerging techno-social paradigm in promoting a legislative advocacy for reproductive health

**Sylvia Estrada-Claudio and Katrina Grace Valdez**  
**Philippines**

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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 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 three eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan and Thailand, 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.

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## **1. Introduction**

The pursuit for gender justice has been an all-encompassing cause for the decades of advocacy and continuing campaign against discrimination, unequal opportunities, and the various struggles on women's rights. The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) - which Maxine Molyneux (2007) describes as the "most comprehensive and far-reaching legislation addressing gender and the family [...] and important for establishing the principle of voluntary regulation of fertility" - and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action's definition on the concept of citizenship, are two international policy documents that have supported women's rights advocates to pursue affirmative action mechanisms, advance law reforms and push for a wider and more meaningful political participation for women.

Advancing law reforms, in particular, is largely informed by the concept of active citizenship, which departs from the formal and traditional idea of citizenship as simply having rights and obligations codified between the State and its citizens. The idea of active citizenship goes beyond this formal sense as it implies participation and agency (Mukhopadhyay, 2007), so that this conceptualisation becomes instrumental as a means for historically disadvantaged groups and marginalised sectors in society like women, to demand their fair share in the allocation of State resources and pursue reforms in law that will institute mechanisms for State accountability in ensuring the outcomes of gender justice. Although pursuing law reforms is not the only way to accomplish this, Ratna Kapur (2007) has pointed out that "given law's location as an authoritative discourse, it does have a critical role to play in shaping the meaning and content of gender justice". Women's increased political participation employing the idea of active citizenship directed towards law reforms make up the small steps towards attaining gender justice. Right now in the Philippines context, for example, one of the steps to be achieved is the passage of the Reproductive Health Bill.

## **2. Women's gains in the Philippine legislative agenda**

In October 2007, a paper written by Aida Santos-Maranan, Nancy Endrinal Parreño and Alinaya Fabros provided valuable insights on Filipino women's political participation through what they called 'encounters of discourse' which culled key issues and challenges of engendering politics and governance from interviews of selected women leaders. While it discussed primarily the status of the women's movements in the country and their possible future directions vis-à-vis the Philippines political landscape, one of the broad themes explored in the document is the gains of women / women's movements in politics and governance. A review of the legacy of women's struggles, which traces its roots from the initial efforts during the anti-colonial revolutions, showed that women have always held a key position in negotiating many aspects of Philippines political life.

From the time *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* was formed in 1905, the consolidation of the emerging women's movement(s) came significantly to the fore during the Suffragist Movement when Filipino women fought for and gained their right to vote in 1937. It gained gradual momentum until the 1970s up to the early 1980s, when feminist discourses began to be articulated more often with the rise of the Left amidst the social unrest that marked the regime of the dictator

Ferdinand Marcos. Various women's formations began to emerge during this period of political turmoil - most of them began being associated with the Left whose main call was for national liberation. However, a number of women activists eventually stood out from these as they began to organise and assert around women-specific issues and a new frame of politics that highlighted the multiple facets of power and oppression which included a critique in body politics and self-determination, altogether abandoning class issues and the nationalist and anti-imperialist struggles, arose (Santos, Parreño, and Fabros, 2007).

Laws that were enacted after the People Power Revolution of 1986 were the first positive steps which became significant achievements at the policy level for women. Foremost was the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which contains salient provisions that promotes and guarantees gender equality. Article 2 Section 14 of the 1987 Constitution provides that "the State recognises the role of women in nation-building and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men". This Constitutional proviso then served as a legal framework for the subsequent enabling legislations enacted by Congress (Hega, 2003).

The Women in Nation Building Law (RA 7192) passed in 1991, was one of those important laws which promoted the integration of women as equal partners in nation-building and provided for the appropriation of a portion of the government budget to support programmes and activities for and by women. RA 7192 also established the Gender and Development Budget otherwise known as the GAD policy which mandated all government agencies to allocate a minimum of 5% of all official development funds in mainstreaming gender concerns (Hega, 2003). Other relevant laws for women that were passed by the Philippine legislature included the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law (RA 7877), which declared sexual harassment as unlawful in the employment, education or training environment; the Anti-Rape Law of 1997 (RA 8353), which reclassified the crime of rape as a crime against persons rather than a crime against chastity; the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act (Anti-VAWC Law /RA 9262), which addressed the issue of domestic violence and provides a range of relief for women and their children who are victims of abuse; and the recently passed Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710), which provided a national framework for the implementation of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN CEDAW), among others.

What is important to note is that the existence of these laws - considered as gains in advancing and protecting women's welfare - would not have been possible if not for the various women's groups who campaigned for their passage. For instance, women's groups, women's rights advocates, victim-survivors and women legislators constantly lobbied and gathered support for almost a decade before the Anti-Rape Law was approved in Congress in 2007. Likewise, the Magna Carta of Women which was signed into law in 2009 also took a decade of constant effort from women activists before its passage. In this sense, the Philippine women's movement has been using legislative advocacy to claim rights, one aspect of active citizenship with a nation-state.

### 3. The struggle for a reproductive health law

More than a year after the passage of the Magna Carta of Women in 2009, women's rights advocates in the Philippines are now pushing for the passage of a reproductive health (RH) law. Almost 30 bills have been filed in both the lower and upper house of Congress following the first RH measure that was filed in 2001. Since then, bills bearing the same purpose have languished in the Philippine legislature. As of now, the campaign for its approval is already in its 10<sup>th</sup> year.

This long-overdue health measure being sought for legislation seeks to protect the reproductive health of women, who suffer the most from a dismal national health situation. Data from the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) provides a summary of the situation (PCW, 2009):

- Philippine maternal mortality rate (MMR) remains high at 162 deaths for every 100,000 live births. The National Statistics Office fears that the slow decline in MMR may cause the Philippines to miss its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of bringing down the MMR to 53 by the year 2015. (Family Planning Survey, 2006).
- Maternal deaths account for 14% of deaths among women. According to the Commission on Population, ten (10) women die every 24 hours from pregnancy or childbirth-related complications (Popcorn, 2000).
- 29 infants of every 1,000 live births die before reaching one year of age; 40 young children die before reaching five years of age. (NSO and NDHS, 2003) 29 infants of every 1,000 live births die before reaching one year of age; 40 young children die before reaching five years of age. (NSO and NDHS, 2003)
- Close birth spacing and high-risk pregnancies have been shown to be closely related to childhood mortality. (NSO and NDHS, 2003)
- The Filipino woman's desired number of children is 2.5. However, the actual fertility rate is 3.5 children or a difference of one child. This difference is due mainly to the lack of information on and access to family planning services. (NSO and NDHS, 2003)
- Only 49.3% of women use any method of contraception, with the use of the pill as the leading contraceptive method, followed by female sterilisation, and the calendar rhythm. Condoms, even though widely distributed, accounted for only 1.9% of the total usage. (NSO-FPS, 2005)
- The unmet need for family planning averages 17.3%. Those belonging to the poorest class have the highest unmet need for family planning at 26.7%, consisting of those who want to space their pregnancies (10.9%), and those who want to limit the number of their children (15.8%). The current unmet need for contraceptives is 23.15% for poor women and 13.6% for women who are not poor. (NSO and NDHS, 2003)
- The use of modern family planning methods increases with the increase in the level of education of women. (NSO and NDHS, 2003)
- 97% of all Filipinos believe it is important to have the ability to control one's fertility or to

plan one's family. It is significant to note that 87% of the total respondents are Roman Catholics. (Pulse Asia Survey, Feb 2004)

The Philippines being a signatory to the UN CEDAW is duty-bound to implement its provisions; specifically, the call to governments for enhancing women's access to health care, including reproductive health services, to address high maternal mortality rates and insufficient family planning services. This fact makes advocacy for a national legislation addressing the reproductive health needs of Filipino women, imperative. As things stand today, considering the lack of conscientiousness of the Philippine government in funding RH services to improve hospital facilities and healthcare workers' skills, a statute specifically underlining the government's duties would ensure accountability (Estrada-Claudio, 2010). When hospitals and health workers refuse to admit patients needing post-abortion care - as abortion is constitutionally prohibited in the country - it would not go unpunished if there is an RH law which would provide penal and civil sanctions for such omissions. When local health clinics refuse to provide reproductive health services, or when local government officials influence local councils to ban the provision of contraceptives in the municipality, an RH law would hold them liable. One example is EO 003 of the City of Manila, the city ordinance passed in the year 2000 during the term of a staunch 'pro-life' mayor, which effectively enabled the ban on the distribution of contraceptives at health centres. This measure was widely criticised by RH activists but remains effective as to this date, pending the approval of the RH bill in the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Considering the fact that the Philippines has a predominantly Catholic population, pressure from the religious hierarchy is the foremost reason why an RH law is still absent from the Philippine statute books. The official Church teaching on family planning approves only of natural methods and none of the artificial methods that have been in the market for so long. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has been very vocal in its opposition to this vital political issue. They have issued statements and read pastoral letters concerning the matter during their masses, gathered signatures in opposition to the RH bills filed in Congress after these mass celebrations, mobilised religious groups within their sphere, and threatened excommunication to members whose views regarding the RH bill they do not approve of. In the CBCP's latest statement on the matter that was released early this year, bishops and archbishops also urged the Catholic flock to engage in civil disobedience if the bill becomes a law.

Noting the growing number of Catholics who favour the passage of an RH law from the foregoing statistics, nonetheless, the CBCP has been successful in blocking its enactment for almost a decade up to the present. And the explanation is apparent: as a major influence in Philippine politics, the Catholic Church is a powerful voice during elections. This is validated by the candidates themselves who take turns visiting bishops in key areas in the country whenever election season draws near, hoping to win supporters from vote-rich provinces. Priests and bishops can implicitly campaign for a candidate, or criticise and denounce a politician's bid for an elective position during one of their masses if they do not approve of his or her agenda or policy propositions. According to Ana Maria Nemenzo of WomanHealth, "legislators are still timid because of a false fear that their political future is at risk if they displease the Church" (Somera, 2009).



But the struggle continues as both RH bill opponents and advocates remain adamant. New, modern battlegrounds for these conflicting stands are being set up to broaden support bases and gain popularity. The Catholic Church and its allied lay organisations are adopting new ICTs strategies, particularly the popular social networking sites in its propaganda against the RH bill's passage. Advocacy efforts are crossing into new horizons which of course, have facilitating and hindering factors in advancing these policy campaigns.

In this regard the advocacy for the anti-rape law is of interest because it was marked by struggles around male privilege and sexuality that also mark the struggles around the reproductive health bill. Similar to the current efforts for the passage of reproductive health legislation, advocates coalesced to form a network called Sibol, which was made up of 11 women organisations. Sibol also used the media. The media did pick up the issue, and Sibol members were hosted by television talk shows and radio programmes. They were also quoted in newspaper columns and articles (PHDRE, 2001).

However, the struggle for the passage of a reproductive health law is unique, in that no other law has met with as much opposition from the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the almost decade-old advocacy has produced significant outcomes already, including those relating to concepts of gender, citizenship and information technology.

A marked contrast between the media strategies used for the struggle for the anti-rape bill is that pro-RH advocates are now using the Internet (both in blogs, social networking sites but also through SMS) as a means for advocacy and mobilisation.

There have also been several polls taken on various aspects of the debate over the years. Polls cited earlier, have shown that high levels of awareness and support have been reached with regards to reproductive health as well as what is contained in the proposed legislation. This in itself is intriguing because the proposed laws use the language of gender equality and women's rights.

On the part of the women and youth advocates, the coalition Reproductive Health Advocacy Network or RHAN which began as 10 Manila-based organisations, is now the largest network of advocates, with 43 organisations several of which have a nation-wide reach. While the backbone remains women's organisations, RHAN now also includes other progressive NGOs.

Apart from coalition-building, a large number of women from poor communities are also participating directly in the legislative process. Pro-RH forces have outnumbered anti-RH forces at pickets, rallies and marches. Similarly, grassroots leaders have been sitting as resource persons in public hearings by various congressional committees. They are also the overwhelming majority who fill up gallery seats during plenary hearings.

Despite this, commentators have noted that the realities and voices of poor women, continue to be downplayed in debates. While this is more greatly noticed in the arguments of those who oppose the bill, advocates themselves feel the need to highlight these women's stories (Torrevillas, 2008).

One contributory factor for this phenomenon is that there has been a long history of disconnect between the Philippine elite which holds economic and political power and the majority poor. Such

a disconnect is maintained because, among other factors, the elite and its technocrats are schooled in English which is not the language of the poor (Constantino, 1982). Indeed both committee hearings and plenary discussions in both the House of Representatives and the Senate are conducted in English.

English is in fact the dominant language for debate and politics in the country. This makes IT use for legislative advocacy by poor women doubly challenging. On the one hand, there is some evidence that Internet use, through Internet cafés (Asia Media Journal, 2009), is allowing greater access to the public realm for poorer sectors. On the other hand, mere availability of women's stories and opinions does not ensure that lawmakers will search these out or listen, especially when there has been a long-standing prejudice against Filipino language articles.

#### **4. Milieu: The ICTs environment in the Philippines**

The Philippines first connected to the Internet in 1994 when a group of universities decided to utilise the technology already gaining ground in the United States. As a new information resource, it did not immediately achieve significance because of its then relatively high cost. After using its bulletin board systems, discovering the services of an e-mail provider, many changes have taken place. It included among others, the use of VOIP (voice over Internet protocol), short messaging services (SMS) or texting, broadband Internet access, wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) connections, 3G, HSDPA, etc..

The country's economy benefited from these improvements in technology as the IT industry slowly evolved into becoming a recognisable figure in the market, providing a number of employment opportunities for both men and women. In some fields of the ICTs industry, female labour participation is slightly higher than male labour participation. In the ICT-intensive Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) business for instance, women account for more than half (55.4%) of the number of workers engaged in medical transcription services, data processing and call centre activities (NSO, 2009). Three out of four medical transcriptionists who are hired are women. Figures seem to confirm the narrowing gender divide in the labour force, particularly in the technology sector. The result of the October 2009 Labour Force Survey (LFS) for instance, showed an increase in the Labour Force Participation Rate (LPFR) for females at 49.3% from 48.6% in 2008 (PCW, 2009).

But it is notable that these surveys have been silent as to how many women hold managerial or top-level positions in these ICT-related businesses. What is interesting to point out is that women outnumber men employees in data processing services, while men still dominate higher-earning consultancy jobs in both hardware and software. It can be inferred that this particular movement may be due to the good number of women who enrol in secretarial courses and vocational courses in medical transcription and are therefore highly skilled in word processing. Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart observed in their 2001 report *Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study*, that assumptions are already being made about which occupations are most suitable to men and women which are determining the career paths of women in the IT sector. It was noted in their study that "women tend to be well represented in desktop publishing and

software programming, but not in hardware design, operating systems, or computer maintenance”. Emerging gender employment patterns in the IT sector are a growing cause of concern as gender inequalities that are present in other labour sectors are being replicated as women tend to be under-represented as administrators and are on lower-level positions.

## 5. Relevant figures on Filipino Internet use

Filipino Internet use has steadily increased within the last 10 years, according to the data compiled by Internet World Statistics (2010). From a minute portion of 2.6% or 2 million out of a population of 70 million in 2000, the Internet user population has grown to 29.7% in 2010 or about 29.7 million out of the estimated 100 million Filipinos, based from statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (2010).

Table 1. Internet Growth in Philippines:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Users</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>% Pop.</b>	<b>Usage Source</b>
2000	2,000,000	78,181,900	2.6 %	ITU
2005	7,820,000	84,174,092	9.3 %	C.I.Almanac
2008	14,000,000	96,061,683	14.6 %	Yahoo!
2009	24,000,000	97,976,603	24.5 %	Nielsen
2010	29,700,000	99,900,177	29.7 %	ITU

Source: <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/asia/ph.htm>

Consistent with this data is the National Telecommunications Commission’s report (2010) which noted an increase in Internet Service Provider (ISP) subscribers. From 2001, with only 500,000 ISP subscribers, it jumped to 2.5 million in 2007, a number mostly from the higher income brackets, classes A, B and C. While the number of home Internet users has been increasing per year, their number only comprise 31% of the Internet user population.

69% of Internet surfers use Internet cafés according to the Yahoo!-AGB Nielsen survey conducted in the last quarter of 2008. Jay Bautista, AGB Nielsen Company Executive Director for Media said that majority of the people in the D and E socio-economic classes favour Internet cafés because of the relatively cheap access rates, averaging from 10-15 pesos an hour. Metro Manila was identified as having the highest Internet access with 40%, followed by Tuguegarao at 37% and Olongapo City at 35%.

In the same survey by Yahoo!-Nielsen, there is an increasing number of Filipinos who are using their mobile phones to surf the Internet. Around 1.7 million or 5% of the 29.7% user population are accessing the Internet through cellular phones. The results are consistent with the fact that with the various surveys on SMS usage, the country remains as the SMS capital of the world, with half a billion text messages coursing through the network traffic per day. The National Telecommunications Commission listed 57 million cellular mobile telephone service (CMTS) subscribers in its 2007 report. SMS technology is the most popular, if not the most utilised, ICT in

the country since access to it cross-cuts through the different social classes. Other than CMTS subscribers connecting to the Internet, the use of SMS allows public access to various services which includes mobile banking and instant access to various government agencies. Take for example, the Civil Service Commission's (CSC) project called TXTCSC where citizens can complain, give observations and suggestions or inquire with the Commission. The Land Transportation Office (LTO) has a similar service where subscribers can send inquiries and receive details regarding vehicle registration and driver licenses.

SMS technology also has evolved as a political participatory tool for citizens. The national election of 2010 for instance, was an event that maximised the potential of SMS utilised by citizens' journalism. The project called WOWW (Watch Out When Women) Vote spearheaded by the UP Centre for Women's Studies and the UP College of Law for the first automated elections in the Philippines, utilised SMS technology for citizen's journalism. People from target communities sent text messages of reports, complaints and observations regarding their election experiences. Similarly, nationwide news organisations tapped the technology for citizen reporting.

By 2010, Philippines has been ranked first in the Asia-Pacific region for having the highest social networking reach and engagement with 90.3% of its whole web population visiting a popular social networking site (ABS-CBN, 2010). Facebook, which remains as the country's most visited website, gets every Filipino visitor staying for about 5.5 hours per visit for an average of 26 times in a month according to the comScore World Metrix service data as of February 2010. A similar listing generated by Google, reveals Facebook leading as well in the Philippines, averaging 10 million users as of September 2010, trailed by two other social networking sites Friendster.com and Tagged.com (Philippine Internet Review, 2010).

With this growing Internet user population and the rising predilection for interactivity through social networking sites, however, the Philippines ranks 85<sup>th</sup> out of 133 countries in the Network Readiness Index rankings of the Global Information Technology 2009-2010 report of the World Economic Forum, far behind neighbours like Malaysia which ranks 27<sup>th</sup> and Vietnam which ranks 54<sup>th</sup>. It shows Internet bandwidth per 10,000 population listed only at 1.1 Mb/s in the Philippines, while that of Thailand which ranks 47<sup>th</sup>, is at 8.6 per 10,000 population, short of saying that ICTs infrastructure badly needs to be improved (World Economic Forum, 2010).

The universal demand for access and the growing need for state policies geared towards ICTs development are still issues that need to be addressed in the Philippine digital environment. The current dearth of government produced statistics on the detailed usage of ICTs and absence of sex-disaggregated data when it comes to Internet use does not facilitate progress on the matter, as it is mostly private companies who commission surveys regarding user characteristics and behaviour to map the terrain of advertising opportunities.

## **6. Websites and social media in the Philippines**

The advent of Web 2.0 paved the way for Filipino Internet users' most popular activity - social networking, which falls within the bigger domain of social media. Social media is the amalgamation

of images, audio, text and video with the added premise of interactivity, content sharing and collaboration. It is YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Facebook and the content mix-up found in blogs - from the blog posts to the resulting throng of comment threads. Surveys commissioned by private companies to define Filipino user behaviour in accessing the Internet have been consistent in pointing out that accessing social media is the top Internet activity, followed by research (using search engines such as Yahoo! and Google), e-mail, online gaming, blogging and online shopping / business on sites such as Multiply and on Filipino classified ad sites such as Sulit.com and AyosDito.ph. For example, online business for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is popular with women as it allows business opportunities with very minimal to zero financial risks - a cheaper way for home makers to augment family income. SME advertising is also active on Facebook which, upon quick observation is dominated by women who sell everything from contact lenses, clothes, to pastries and home-made dishes.

A type of social media which boomed in the recent years is the blog, a shortened term for weblogs, which in the early 1990s started as online journals and were kept alive by a loyal following of readers. From the ordinary diary electronically published by regular individuals who posted and shared their opinions, insights and daily experiences on the web, it was quickly adopted by people who saw its huge potential as an ICT tool for promoting specific interests and advocacies. It was professionalised, (and on a separate matter, was also commercialised when advertisers lost no opportunity for capitalising anything people wanted to see on the Internet) as journalists and news organisations also used this form of social media as an extension of the newsroom. Professional blogs, as Frederic Filloux (2010) observed, can be the most advanced form of written journalism - insightful standard stories, but way more fun to read. Major news organisations in the country like ABS-CBN News, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, and GMA News now have their own list of bloggers on their news websites, expanding the line of columnists who cannot be accommodated on the printed version.

Blogs with an advocacy (and anti-advocacy) agenda also flourished. The current debate on the passage of a reproductive health law in the Philippines spawned blogs and blog articles on the matter which argue either in favour of it or against it and in turn, produce the thread of comments of readers who are also either for or against it. Public feedback in these comment threads are seen by some observers in the negative light, especially those which are unfiltered and unmoderated. Filloux noted, seemingly arguing against open and free comments access:

“[...] most online editors satisfy themselves by opening the floodgate of comments, without a strategy, or even the slightest attention to content. As a result, everybody loses: the writer who sees painstaking work defaced by shouts; and the publication for allowing substandard, unmoderated feedback. Participation without relevancy is pointless” (2010).

But a counter-argument to this is the basic premise itself of social media, which is interactivity. Whether a blog is strictly composed of news articles sponsored by a news organisation, or advocacy material written by independent advocates or organised NGOs, the same aims are in operation - to stimulate the level of public participation and discussion on issues.

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) has a relevant stipulation which provides that

people have the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Since a blog has no built-in editor or moderator which automatically regulates content or checks the accuracy of facts written, public feedback all the more becomes important. Nonetheless, questions regarding censure and moderation remain relevant in the ongoing debate regarding Internet freedom as it is a specific form of the freedom of expression.

## **7. The social networking site as an advocacy tool**

Social networking sites or specifically, Facebook, as the most popular for social media being accessed by the Internet user population, has been a success because of its integration of the various forms of social media into mainstreamed, unified content. It incorporates YouTube, Twitter, blogging, etc., and puts in the user option of sharing it with the rest of the world for them to discuss. As an ICT tool for advocacy promotion and encouraging political participation, it has an immense potential because of its given popularity and the free space it provides for interaction in its public feedback system.

The freedom to connect is likened to the freedom of assembly transported into cyber space. The recently conducted national elections of 2010 utilised Facebook as a campaign stage, as both national and local candidates created accounts and fan pages of politicians running for public office. When it was over, The Presidential Communications Operations Office maintained the Facebook page of the elected President, which kept it active despite the flooding of criticism. On the RH bill campaign, several Facebook pages have come up in support of it, gathering 'likes' by people from different regions and individual members posting relevant news items and insights.

In the ICTs study report released by Isis International Manila (2007), in which women were surveyed on what they think are the top three reasons given as to why a communication tool was considered effective, they provided: (1) its interactive nature (68%), (2) its wide-reaching coverage (68%); and (3) its visually stimulating nature (68%). The immediate feedback, the report pointed out, "not only cuts back on time and costs, but also potentially furthers one understanding of the issue [...] and after that, there can be interaction or deepening".

## **8. Women and the Internet: The politics of access**

One of the pioneering researches on Filipino Internet usage was conducted by Janette Toral in 2002 and 2003 with the documentation produced in Filipino Internet User Report Part 1 and Part 2, where more than a thousand Internet users from 10 regions were randomly surveyed. Part 2 reports that since 2003, more women are online compared to men - the majority of which are young people who preferred Internet cafés as their access point because of its relatively cheap rates. Toral's findings corroborate with Hafkin and Taggart's report (2001) which showed the Philippines at par with the United States and South Africa as having a high percentage of women who go online at 51%. These figures are optimistic. However, it is imperative to state the obvious: the high Internet activity of women is concentrated on regions where Internet can be accessed, and these are in developed cities and municipalities where there are a number of Internet cafés and a decent Internet connection.

In one of the studies conducted by Isis International Manila regarding women's use of ICTs, it showed that the Internet is considered the least accessible ICT tool to grassroots women; mainly because access to it necessitates a lot of expenses that most of them could not afford. Among the grassroots, it is the youth who are able to access (albeit limitedly) the Internet, through their schools. Interesting to mention here is the observation that some grassroots women tend to be shy in going to Internet cafés, although the reason for this is still unknown and merits further study. Further, the ISIS study noted:

“Like the Internet, the computer requires money and literacy. Few among the grassroots can afford the cost of buying a computer and few have the skills to operate it [...] while this is really good, getting information, networking, and accessing, very few can afford it” (Isis Manila, 2007).

Furthermore, while access of poorer classes to the Internet through Internet cafés may be encouraging, this idea needs further study. A common observation is that Internet cafés are mostly filled by young men for gaming purposes. This may be one reason why women tend to shy away.

The existing social order constitutes the political economy of the digital environment. And the implications of exclusion are far reaching. Issues concerning people's access to resources, services and ICTs tools, which only people from the upper income brackets have the privilege of appropriating to advance their economic and political concerns and interests, needs to be addressed. Hafkin and Taggart (2001) have pointed out that language, time, cost, geographical location, social and cultural norms and skills are most often the obstacles to women's access to new ICTs. Likewise, Isis Manila's research (2007) identified similar factors and noted that although the Internet opens “many positive changes, it could also exacerbate patriarchy and the digital divide”. While the premise of interactivity, connection, openness and inclusion of the Internet shows promise for the empowerment and increased political participation for marginalised women, the feminist critique regarding power relations, existing cultural norms and practices and hegemonic ideologies are not rendered passé in the digital environment.

## **9. Engendering technology, modernising advocacy**

The emerging techno-social paradigms brought forth due to new ICTs and the surge of social media provide new opportunities for advocating women's rights. The need, therefore, is to ensure that these groups along with the women they represent are able to take advantage of these new ways of communication. Since the issue on ICT access by women has been identified, failure to consider gender concerns such as sexual division of labour, women's economic and political participation, women's IT skills, etc., in framing strategies for appropriating ICT tools for legislative advocacy would be fatal.

What needs to be done is to eliminate the obstacles to women's ICT access and encourage them, especially the marginalised, to share their personal stories of struggle with the hope of establishing solid public support for their advocacies and legislative reforms, that women's rights advocates are pushing for, like the RH bill. Maximising the potential of the Internet and social media is a very

viable strategy in this hope and eventually, in influencing the stance of policy-making decisions regarding the RH legislative agenda.

Efforts on the matter are underway. Several women related NGOs have taken up the campaign of increasing women's ICTs literacy and they have included computer skills-training in their various skills-training programs. Isis International Manila, the UP Centre for Women's Studies and Likhaan Centre for Women's Health, for example, are among those engaged in this advocacy. On a separate level, RH advocates are also engaging in debates on the web, creating buzz about the topic and waging arguments against the anti-RH dogmas of the CBCP which similarly target the online community. They respond to anti-RH blogs, create pro-RH pages on Facebook, post videos on YouTube and link them to their Facebook accounts, with the goal of increasing public attention on the issue, and moulding public opinion. A quick search on 'RH Bill' or Facebook.com as of date would generate the 'I support the RH Bill!' or 'I support the Reproductive Health Bill' page with around 12,600 and 8,000 'likes' respectively. On the other hand, the page 'I Oppose the RH Bill' has 10,000 'likes'. The Likhaan Center for Women's Health and its members have been engaging in the online strategy with their website at Likhaan.org. The site contains news and featured articles on RH topics, including a downloadable library of related documents and audiovisual materials for interested RH advocates. Data from the site's Google analytics provide that most visitors who access the website are interested in getting / reading the full text of the RH Bills proposed by members of the legislature, and family planning.

Blogs, social networking sites, etc. are indeed being used for and against the bill, but these must be taken only within the context of a multi-pronged approach to advocacy. Similarly, the use of IT by poor women to advocate for the passage of reproductive health legislation is only one element in asserting their rights. How IT use contributes to their reformulation of citizenship and empowerment, cannot be isolated. The very act of writing articles or taking photos already pre-supposes involvement in the struggle.



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