

SESSION I: Stories of Change – What is emerging from the CITIGEN research. Presentations by the CITIGEN research teams

The 6 research teams presented their multimedia essays to share:

- What is emerging through their respective research on the connections between gender, ICTs and women's citizenship.
- How the emerging insights talk to their hypotheses and theories-in-the-making.

Each team had 15 minutes to present and 10 minutes for discussions with the larger group.

Chair: Kalyani Menon Sen, Researcher, writer and feminist activist, India

The workshop began with a session dedicated to the 'Stories of Change', multimedia essays capturing the story emerging from their work in relation to the conceptual framework informing CITIGEN. Each team shared the emerging

threads observed with regard to the connections between gender, ICTs and women's citizenship, as well as how these insights related to their hypotheses and theories-in-the-making.

1. Bangladesh – Influence of new media in negotiating citizenship rights of marginalised women (Presented by Ananya Raihan, Executive Director, Development Research Network (D.Net), Bangladesh)

The Bangladeshi project 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. The research aims at understanding the level and extent of marginalised women's participation in creating these discourses through new media. Two initiatives are being studied. One is the online citizen mobile journalism platform www.write3.com, launched in January 2011, where all citizens can capture and post stories through their mobile phone. It is developed as a news platform 'of the people, by the people and for the people'. Write3 is connected to the mainstream media, ATN news, through which some of the stories are broadcast. It will showcase a variety of marginalised and unheard voices, demonstrating thereby how new media influence both perspectives of citizenship, especially women's citizenship, and women's role in shaping discourses of citizenship. Secondly,

the study analyses the role of info-ladies, an initiative for the women and by the women, in the context of emerging discourses on women's citizenship. The info-ladies ICT literate rural women with a high-school education background. Cycling from village to village, they provide a range of information to rural women, helping farmers, as well as pregnant women, children, field workers, etc. The strength of info-ladies lies in their networking role: connected among themselves, they also connect rural women linking them to local and national power holders.



Ananya Raihan

Raihan ended the presentation by giving statistics of the new media landscape in Bangladesh that show that even outside major cities and privileged areas, women are participating on online platforms.

Discussion

The discussion raised clarifications about the fees for the services, as well as about the selection process and the training of info-ladies. Info-ladies are chosen according to both their

quick learning abilities and good communication skills. They are trained on a series of technical tools (basic medical equipment and data-reading, digital camera, relevant Internet browsing, etc.).

Fees vary according to the service provided. For most services, there is a nominal fee, but for the poorest who cannot afford even that cost, it is free. Some services are costly, e.g. talking to

relatives abroad. Info-ladies earn around 300 US dollars a month, one half comes from the community, the other half comes from linking local producers with national level sellers.

2. China – Women's online participation and the transformation of citizenship (Presented by Haitao Huang, Research Fellow, Laboratory of Media Anthropology, Sun Yat-sen University, China)



Haitao Huang

The Chinese project compares the ways in which women from different social positions use ICTs in order to define and negotiate their citizenship rights. It focuses on Hong Kong and Guangdong (mainland China), where two distinctive political systems are in place.

The presentation started with the screening of a [video clip](#), created on the occasion of the Chinese president's visit to the USA in 2007. The clip, an advertisement for China that was screened on Times square, shows the gender regime propagated by the government: women are represented as ethnic minorities or oriental consumption subjects or objects.

Since the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), academic and social networks working on gender, sexuality and LGBT issues have flourished, along with the online citizen rights movement. A few cases are considered as milestones of the online citizen rights movement. Beyond merely presenting the victories of the movement, Huang explained how activists used patriarchal values and story-lines to mobilise people, wherein, paradoxically, using more nuanced arguments could have weakened the successes already achieved.

The China team focuses its research on three types of women agencies and their use of ICTs in defining and defending women's citizen rights.

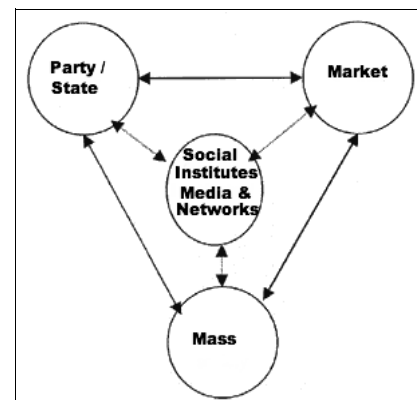
At the individual level, they analyse the 'story of Ai Xiaoming', a locally-trained scholar and the first Chinese woman to have had a PhD since the cultural revolution. She launched a forum on gender education and created with her students a local version of the *Vagina monologues*. Her story

will show how individual activists use ICTs to engage with the public on gender and sexuality issues.

At the level of social institutions, they focus on the 'story of the Gender and Media Action Group', a network of professional women media workers devoted to advocate for greater gender equality and the abolition of cultural constructions.

At the semi-governmental level, they study the 'story of the All-China Women Federation', a semi-governmental organisation whose employees are civil servants without feminist background. The Federation generally presents stereotypical images of women, often complying with the communist ideology, and refuses to get involved in contentious gender issues, such as the melamine contaminated milk incident.

Based on the stories analysed, the team wishes to build a theoretical relation between the public sphere and the civil society, considering also the concept of 'innovative social management', a set of government policies aiming at controlling massive protest and cracking down online political dissidents. Applying Johan Galtung's conceptualisation of the relation between civil society, state, capital and media to the Chinese context, they show how activists' space is between the mass, seen by the Chinese Communist Party as a source of instability to be controlled, and social institutes, media and networks, i.e. the public sphere. Deliberation will be limited to social institutes, such as universities, media and to a highly manipulated Internet.



Discussion

The discussion raised questions about diverging conceptions of human rights and public sphere, usually defined according to Western standards. Lam Oi Wan explained how the Chinese government is involved in defining the rights legal framework. Rights are mostly understood as economic rights (property rights) and defending these rights therefore means defending capitalist

interests rather than actual human rights.

Oi Wan also clarified that spaces for protest are extremely limited as even at the local level, the work of small groups are monitored, e.g. LGBT groups have to frame their work under the banner of HIV and AIDS prevention and their websites are still controlled.

3. India - Empowering women leaders at the local level: Translating descriptive representation to substantive representation through ICTs (Presented by Binitha V. Thampi, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India)



Binitha V. Thampi

The Indian team is working on the empowerment of women elected representatives at the local level, exploring the role of ICTs in effecting their substantive representation in local institutions in the state of Kerala (India) where functional literacy is high and fifty percent of the seats in local governing bodies are reserved for women. The team believes that the situation of women elected representatives can be improved *inter alia* through the deployment of a knowledge network. Such a network would provide a platform to engender governance, freely articulate and share experiences, concerns and knowledge, and thereby empower the individual women members, as it is recognised that knowledge regarding governance rules and orders can be used as effective tools to resist and negotiate patriarchal power in the every day work lives. The network has been created by linking the existing support groups of outgoing women presidents of *panchayats*¹ with the next generation of elected women representatives.

In the initial stage of the project, three districts have been selected – Trivandrum, Malappuram and Kannur – from which 125 women leaders are expected to join the group. The name of the online platform is *Gramamukhya*. The technical design of the platform envisaged for the creation

of this interactive communication community is inspired by design-in-progress approach in tandem with its users, their skill levels and their dynamic requirements. The main design features of *Gramamukhya* are the information sharing and support group, the discussion forum and the writer's blog.

The team collaborates with *Mahila Samakhya*² Kerala in both incorporating an ICT module in the ongoing training programmes of *Mahila Samakhya* and helping with the training in two districts (Trivandrum and Malappuram).

The next phase of the project will see the completion of the initial round of trainings with *Mahila Samakhya* Kerala, as well as the update of the website (discussion forum and writer's blog).

¹ *Panchayats* are village level self-governance institutions in the Indian administrative system.

² The *Mahila Samakhya* programme (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India) aims at translating the goals of the national policy on education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalised groups.

Discussion

The discussion raised questions about the oral components of the research, as Ananya Raihan noted that South Asian societies are oral societies before being writing societies. Thampi recalled that in her previous experience, women when given notebooks were very keen to write about their experiences, which foreshadows a possibly easy adaptation to writing online.

Questions arose about the role of the technicians who are designing the modes of communication

used, i.e. the website and its pedagogic approach, as well as about the high rates of computer literacy among the women trained, the actual nature of their knowledge, which often includes MS Office but not Internet tools which are seen as games for children or office equipment for men. J. Devika recalled how women elected representatives who she was interviewing for a research were keen to talk till late in the night on the mobile phones eager to express their thoughts.

4. Philippines - Bringing the local and intimate to the national and institutional: Using IT for legislative advocacy for reproductive health, gender, citizenship and IT research project in the Philippines (Presented by Francisco dela Tonga, Youth Coordinator, Likhaan, Philippines)

The Filipino project aims at bringing gender and reproductive health issues from the local to the national and institutional level, through a citizen journalism action research project.

Even though it has been actively supported by family planning organisations, women and health NGOs and community-based groups, the passing of the reproductive health bill has been pending for ten years. The bill supports policy frames based on human rights, gender equality, promotion of child rights and welfare, access to reproductive health information and services and eradication of discrimination in the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights. It includes provisions with regard to maternal health, family planning and reproductive health education, which are essential in a country with high rates of unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality and HIV infection. In spite of this reality, the Catholic Church is actively preventing the passing of the bill, spreading misinformation in the Sunday preaches and threatening the bill's supporters of excommunication.

Discussion

Answering questions about the potential of the debates around the bill to generate broader discussions around the connections between gender, sexuality and violence, Sylvia Estrada-Claudio stressed the complexity of the situation.

The community journalism project creates a space for women and young people to freely express their feelings and thoughts on the reproductive health bill. It also provides an alternative to the Church's vision on reproductive health issues. So far, eleven community journalists, coming from urban poor communities, have been trained. They have written seventeen articles, five of which have been translated in English, about the bill's hearings, stories and perspectives of women, gays and young people about the bill, gender and reproductive health issues, etc. The challenges faced by the community journalists are many: combining activism and family responsibilities, learning to use a computer, physically accessing computers in Internet cafés, etc. In order to move forward, the team is planning to train a second batch of community journalists, organise more computer and Internet tutorials, recruit an English translator and try audio-video articles.



Francisco dela
Tonga

The community journalism project is organically linked to the bill, which is organically linked to the reproductive health and rights activism. Advocacy for the bill is multiple, and most of it focuses on the maternal mortality situation,

which is the least objectionable argument for conservative groups, even though it does not address the larger agenda of human, sexual and reproductive rights. Community journalists attempt to provide the missing perspectives about the issue even though the struggle for the bill remains very much linked to the wider women's health movement.

5. Sri Lanka – Women and the new media in the margin of the Sri Lankan state (Presented by Sachini Perrera, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka)

The aim of the research is to study how new media transform citizenship practices of women who are currently in the margins of the political and civic life in Sri Lanka. It explores the potential of new media to provide a transformative platform for women to both renegotiate and exercise their citizenship, and contribute to discourses on formal citizenship at the local and national levels. Through this process, the team also wishes to assess the way new and mainstream media engage with and feed into each other in terms of discourses on women and formal citizenship.

At the local level, the team launched a pilot project, *Minmini News*, a SMS-based news network for rural women in Batticaloa district. As a result of thirty years of civil war, social structures have been highly disrupted, resulting *inter alia* in many women becoming household heads. The platform enables women to create news items and subsequently send them to whoever relevant. Analysing the network will provide insights on the potential of new media to enable marginalised women to access services and information, inform discourses on governance and citizenship and active engagement with local level decision-making bodies. The news items created so far are mostly

Discussion

Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda provided explanations about the choice of the medium, stating that mobile phones were used because they had a very high penetration in Sri Lanka. However, there is an issue in studying the relation between sending news items by SMS and

Estrada-Claudio also provided clarifications about the publication process, explaining how the online version of the articles is the new format of a printed newspaper, which means that the process still follows a cycle of preparatory meeting, deadlines, editing, as well as feedback on the articles published.

about the floods, women's livelihoods, gender-based violence and child abuse, local and international women's activism, public services and women's political participation. The pilot looks at creating avenues for women through SMS. It raises interesting questions about the meaning of being an active citizen journalist, power relations in deciding what constitute news items and ways to interact actively with news receivers.

At the national level, in the context of the local government elections of March 2011, the project launched a awareness-raising campaign about the importance of women's political participation and representation in mainstream politics. The Women and Media Collective created a blog providing information about potential candidates. Through this medium, they analysed women's access to information about the elections as well as their response to high awareness raising.

Simultaneously, the team is conducting two case studies. One about women using IT in selected telecentres; the other one about a newsletter developed by the community using unicode.

exercising citizenship rights because such a straightforward correlation cannot be surveyed.

Answering a question about the methodological connection between the two levels of the study, Kottegoda clarified that the overarching theme of the study is women accessing IT, which is



Sachini Perrera

explored through the two different ways described.

6. Hong Kong/Taiwan – The power to organise and engage: The use of ICTs by women migrant domestic workers' organisations (Presented by Philippa Smales, Researcher, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, Thailand)

The project looks at women migrant domestic workers from Philippines and Indonesia working in Hong Kong and Taiwan, two locations which are good examples in terms of commonalities and differences with regard to labour policies. Hong Kong's labour laws protect migrant domestic workers and entitle them to have Sundays off. This enables them to organise themselves and be vocal and visible in the city. On the contrary, Taiwan's legal framework for migrant domestic workers is non-existent. They are not visible and lack coordination, as they do not have a weekly day off and a space to meet.

In both countries, the mobile phones is the first tool used to organise migrant domestic workers, as a great majority of domestic workers have mobile phones and make intensive use out of it. They use it mostly to get information

(information from friends and other domestic workers), to connect to organisations through friends (and friends of friends), and to share regular meeting places. There is a strong connection between having Sundays off, and effective organising and participation in society/politics, simply through their presence in the public sphere. ICT connection is most crucial when it is not possible to have a regular meeting place and day. Primary contact with organisations is through mobiles, however most organisations only text or call in response and do not have systems in place. Organisation and information dissemination could be more efficient and effective by informing organisations on cheap simple ICT systems (such as a basic bulk text system).



Philippa Smales

Discussion

Answering queries about the influence of the politics of migrants' country of origin on their organising, Smales noted that the regulations of the sending country have a lot less impact than the ones of the receiving country. She also clarified the methodology used in surveying migrant domestic workers. The basic survey asked multiple choice questions, another version enabled more detailed answers but the

conditions of the field did not systematically allow this, especially for the women who did not have any day off.

Oi Wan pointed that taking into account IT policies could provide interesting insights on the capacity of migrant domestic workers to organise as for instance, community radios are allowed in Taiwan but not in Hong Kong.