SESSION IV: Feminist spaces in the network society – Engendering resistance

This session looked at the contestations around gender and citizenship as they emerge in the information society context. It examined practices at the margins that inform feminist conceptions of citizenship, critiquing mainstream network society ideologies while also capitalising on emerging opportunities.

Chair: Maitrayee Chaudhury, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

1. **India team presentation – Aarti Kawlra, Associate Faculty and Project Consultant, Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, India and J. Devika, Associate Professor, Centre for Development Studies, India**

Aarti Kawlra

Aarti Kawlra drew from the Indian project to elaborate the impact of the design of ICTs on their implementation and inclusive potential, arguing thereby for a design that would enable feminist appropriation. This technical premise takes into account the differential usage of the computer, as well as the need for socio-technical networks of communication that are not only open and context specific but also self-directed, self-reflective, and self-representative, offering genuine opportunities for socio-political change. In order to support community interaction and enable meaningful sociability, the actual procedure for the development and design of digital media needs to be examined. The approach taken by the Indian team in designing their online platform *Gramamukhya* is one of design-in-progress in constant interaction with the users, towards a real co-creation of ICTs. It is an approach that privileges what women say and in what context they are saying it over what women 'need'.

J. Devika

Devika shared insights from the larger research on which the Indian project is based. Even though women elected representatives at the local level have gained self-esteem *inter alia* through the acquisition of knowledge, the political arena remains extremely gendered. Women are restrained to the bottom of the hierarchy, which is a common characteristic of both the political and the economic neo-liberal orders. Despite the work to empower local leaders, the researchers have noticed that women local leaders are not seen as important actors by local women, which shows a perpetuation of this gendered division between high politics and local governance. There seems to be a need therefore to re-theorise local governance and the engagement of feminists with local governance. In that sense, ICTs can provide new avenues. First, it is possible to exploit the de-territorialised nature of communication in the information society. Second, the Internet allows for a multiplicity of actors to come together and interact in less hierarchical ways, where centres of a network are multiple and shifting according to the flow of the different nodes. Third, through the digital space, the possibilities of the self can be re-

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deployed strategically, as e.g. everybody can write and be published on the Internet which can strengthen people's sense of their own individuation. Furthermore, processes of co-creation, with constant engagement between the online and offline context, can create active and self-reflective connections among individuals.

2. Chinese team presentation – Lam Oi Wan, Global Voices Online and Hong Kong In-Media, China

Oi Wan started her presentation by screening a [clip](#) that shows the relationship between the people and the state in China. Because of this strong dichotomy around which all discourses are built, feminists' position in China is very marginalised and therefore, building a feminist counter-perspective has proved difficult.

Different feminist spaces have to be considered. Online spaces, such as blogs and social media, are potential spheres for grassroots women to 'speak bitterness', but not always in progressive ways. Incidents, such as the contaminated milk

Lam Oi Wan

citizen rights movement in Hong Kong. However, ICTs provide a more accessible space for networking, as well as community and solidarity building, than direct engagement in public discussions. Building a feminist counter-public is difficult also because the notion of citizenship is broadly understood as gender neutral – women issues being often confined to the private domain. The technological determinism in developing online publics only further complicates the formation of a feminist counter-public.

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incident, or the overpopulation of Hong Kong hospitals with Chinese mothers trying to avoid the one child policy, have led to a right turn in the

Feminist strategies to influence and politicise the offline and online publics have to go beyond putting forward a feminist agenda: they have to actively engage with other public discourses and bring feminist perspectives on political and cultural phenomena that may not be directly related to women. Alliance building can enable women from very different backgrounds to make their voice heard. What is crucial as well is to build a sustainable model, which is something Chinese feminists have been struggling with.

3. Presentation by Supinya Klangnarong, Think piece author, CITIGEN and vice-chair of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, Thailand

Supinya Klangnarong

Klangnarong spoke about gender perspectives on uses of ICTs in the context of the political transformation in Thailand, an aspect which has gained less attention than issues of civil and political rights. She began by sharing data on Internet access in Thailand which does not show significant difference between men and women. The prevalent Internet user is a female student, aged 20-29, living in the Bangkok metropolitan area. However, and even though the number of Internet users has been increasing considerably, the digital divide between urban centres and rural periphery is still very high.

Access to the Internet exposes both men and women to discourses and opinions which question hegemonic patriarchal models, in a broader way than their immediate environment or state-controlled and commercial traditional media previously have. In the midst of political crisis, Thailand has to face what the Internet brought to the fore with regard to gender and sexuality, having to deal with its image of sex industry. The conservative traditional Thai gender regime is challenged by people's exposure to discourses on liberated sexuality on the Internet, without having experienced a moderated transition from sexuality being taboo in the family realm and in the mainstream media to being exposed to very crude images on the Internet.

Within this context, the Internet is a space where online heated debates about gender and sexuality issues can take place, which is impossible in mainstream media. However, because of the political crisis, there has been a rise in censored political websites, compared to pornographic websites, leading Thailand to be classified as 'not free' in the 2011 Freedom on the Net report. In the context of the political transformation, the Internet is mostly being considered as a space for political activism at the expense of gender justice issues which tend to be sidelined. Even though it is a moment of confusion and chaos, Klangnarong said ICTs can create spaces for

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dialogue and communication referring to uses of the Internet. However, resistance is difficult as the Internet challenges all types of establishment, including both progressive and conservative ideas.

4. Responses and Perspectives – Kalyani Menon Sen, Researcher, writer and feminist activist, India

Menon Sen reflected on the multiple uses of ICTs in relation to citizenship, and on ways in which power relationships are being shaped through this process. As activists explore ways to use ICTs to claim citizenship, states simultaneously use ICTs as ways of defining and validating citizenship, as well as to shape how citizenship is being dealt with. The very concept of citizenship is at a turning point, which is why it needs to be engaged with.

She took the example of the UID (Unique Identification) initiative of the Government of India. The way in which the project has been

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implemented, as well as the way it is turned into an application for other areas of governance, shows that the UID define citizenship, while excluding those who claim citizenship in defiance of the state and being a tool for surveillance and social control. To use the Chinese terminology,

she said, it is a good example of 'innovative social management'. In practice, the UID system leads people to have to reassert their citizenship via the constant control of their biometric data which overrides proofs of citizenship via residence, property, employment, etc. The UID takes citizenship debates outside of the rights-based discourse on civil and political rights as it is primarily linked to basic social welfare (food ration, school registration, etc.), which is what citizenship is about for ordinary people. The danger lies in this constant reassertion of citizenship which is required by the UID system and is controlled by a remote 'neutral' database. Ironically, the UID is advertised as an initiative that will enable marginalised people to claim citizenship. The UID asks questions about gender relationships, and other power relationships, in the new ecology, showing how power imbalances are likely to remain unchanged. New technologies are a continuum of old technologies. Analyses about the control of information and knowledge, as well as the mechanisms of knowledge creation, still apply to new technologies. These issues have to be analysed in the context of debates on governance and citizenship.

Kalyani Menon Sen

5.   Responses and Perspectives – Manjima Bhattacharya, Member, Jagori, India

Bhattacharya shared her thoughts on the session. One of the points emerging from the discussion, she felt, was a sense that there is a feminisation of the web, similarly to a feminisation of labour. This needed to be interrogated further in terms of its resultant meanings. In terms of the innovative models that use intermediaries, she questioned the nature of impact and the vulnerability of these intermediaries at the structural level.

She also felt that it was important to look at the changing relationship between gender and technology, but also between class and technology, including the fear that technologies and the Internet generate on the ground as brought up by the Indian team. Mulling on the concept of silence, she said that in the age of digital natives, self-censorship was a central impediment to both the establishment of a

feminist consciousness and the politicisation of digital spaces. Even though the Internet is an open space, it is not yet a free space. From a feminist perspective, observing women representing themselves along patriarchal ideals was disturbing.

Manjima Bhattacharya

To the question of what can ICTs do for feminism, she recalled Cynthia Enloe's concept of a curious feminist. She noted how young women familiarised themselves with feminism through odd influences online which enabled them to discover that strain of feminist in them and articulate a feminist opinion.

Session Discussions

Discussions brought up reflections around intergenerational issues with regard to the use of ICTs for resistance and transformation, and feminist engagement with news ways to work for social change. Oi Wan shared that in China, there are two levels of citizen-state relationships: the 'dinosaur' type which is actualised through very ancient forms of resistance with no mediation by the civil society (e.g. people hurting their own body as a sign of resistance) and the liberal type which takes place in the digital spaces. However, the two are intertwined as the latter diffuses images of the former, which means that ICTs provide a space for transforming the politics in a politically dinosaur country. Devika pointed out the intergenerational challenge faced by feminists in Kerala, where the feminist movement has not been able so far to respond in creative ways to movements about non heterosexual identities. In her opinion, the problem lies in the hierarchical characteristic of the dominant communication methodology which does not allow a multi-centric model where interaction is made easier.

Reflections also emerged regarding the contribution of Menon Sen, raising points

regarding the nature of the state itself that needs to be questioned and how the UID system is a globalisation from above with state collusion.

Singh and Gurumurthy shared reflections about the premises of the programme. The hypothesis is that there is a common essence of principles and tendencies which, if captured, will enable to understand better the new ecology. Different layers have to be addressed simultaneously: the hype about ICTs, new models of practice and architecture and policies. ICTs have to be seen as the ingredients that constitute our social reality, not as tools that are outside of us. The starting question was: if technologies are reconstituting our world, what is the dialectic between the social institutional and technological affordances? When women's citizenship is analysed in the information society, new issues emerge, such as women representing themselves as sexual subjects, that require feminists to engage with.

The session ended with comments from the chair, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, who reasserted the need to recognise that ICTs do open up new possibilities. Even though some of the issues

pertaining to ICTs are also relevant for traditional forms of media, the feminist take has to be redefined, as well as the relation of feminist politics with other forms of radical politics. Furthermore, what ICTs enable, such as the interaction of a multiplicity of voices, needs to be problematised with regard to the true democratic potential offered.