

Note submitted by IT for Change to the e-discussion on 'Social media and democratic space' by UNDP APCR

South Asia, marked by emerging economies, political regimes with differing degrees of democracy and post colonial societal tensions and possibilities makes an interesting site for studying the impact of social media on the nature of democratic spaces and its expansion. IT for Change has been coordinating a research programme, Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN), emerging insights from which are relevant to the topic under discussion. Apart from the perspectives from three South Asian countries - Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka – observations from China are also presented below.

Our ongoing work is available at [www.gender-IS-citizenship.net](http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net). The summaries below are more pertinent to this discussion. For instance, Farida Shaheed, in her think-piece '[Gender and citizenship in the information society: A perspective from Pakistan](#)' looks at various dimensions of social media in the socio-political context of Pakistan with some observations also from the Middle East. In Pakistan, there has been notable use of social media during the humanitarian crisis of 2006 earthquake and 2010 floods and during the anti-emergency activism of 2007-08. The more recent government-citizen interface in the form of feedbacks to legislations has also used the channel of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Shaheed points out the importance of linkages between 'public spheres' opened by new ICTs and the corresponding ground realities. To ensure that the citizens' feedbacks to legislations provided through online platforms find a place in the final policy, she argues how political/institutional mediation is required. While activism has become easier, much more people can be reached in very little time, this alone does not ensure analytical engagement with the movements. Similarly, she also observes that while dispersed leadership disallows complete clampdown, and this can be an important tactical advantage while protesting under authoritarian regimes, what comes through from the experiences in Pakistan is that it also impedes clarity on overall purposes and tactics as it provides no space to debate and decide matters beyond the immediate acts of protest.

Writing in the context of the 'Arab Spring', Shaheed draws attention to the relatively small number of people active on social media sites. She also questions the possibility of such an impact if these social media sites had not been connected to the older broadcast media. Citing the example of the 'green movement' in Iran in 2009, Shaheed points out how the restrictions on mainstream media was countered by citizen journalists using ICTs. This demolished the barriers between acceptable and non-acceptable sources for news, opened up the public sphere and democratised discourse shaping. This attains high significance in the context of relatively closed societies like Pakistan, where vocalising alternative opinions constitutes high risk behaviour.

The [action research project in Kerala](#) (India) explores the possibility of expanding substantive participation of women representatives in the local governing bodies by creation of horizontal support networks through the use of new ICTs. As a part of the research an online platform (Gramamukhya) has been created where women representatives interact through information sharing and support group, the discussion forum and the writer's blog . Explaining the underlying principle behind the platform design, the team says that 'we are aware that a user-centric design must in fact not be pre-determined and instead evolve over time, together with its users, and customised and flexible enough to cater to their specific requirements.' The emerging insights indicate that the design of the concerned social media have been largely responsible for the quality of inclusion. The action research also shows how socio-technical networks of communication need to not only be open and context specific but also self-directed, self-representative, and offering genuine opportunities for socio-political change. The peer to peer, horizontal connections between the women have mattered the most, even as the platform has provided a common space for a

gendered discourse around women and politics to be articulated. The Kerala project thus shows how ICTs can strengthen people's sense of self and individuation; while also allowing processes of co-creation, with constant engagement between the online and offline context, and thus create active and self-reflective connections among individuals.

In post-conflict societies like Sri Lanka, expansion of democratic spaces is a vital concern. The [action research programme in Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka](#), focusses on the potential of discourse shaping by the marginalised women through the use of social media, specifically an SMS based news network (Minmini News). The research has generated questions around the meaning of being an active citizen journalist, power relations in deciding what constitute news items and ways to interact actively with news receivers.

It is also clear from the Sri Lankan context that access to economic resources, political power and military control are very much part of the baggage of ICTs – defining the arena of who actually will have access or not and what it will be used for. Hence, programmes that would encourage and bring in people from marginalised communities to learn and use ICTs need to be constructed keeping in mind their political identities.

The theme of women negotiating their citizenship through ICTs in a differentiated public sphere is central to the [research being done in China](#). In exploring three types of women agencies, individual, social institutional and semi-governmental within the state-civil society discourse, two clear insights have emerged. First, in authoritarian polities where the very space for dissent is also controlled, it is new media that facilitates new forms of activism. Second, it was found that new media brings into sharp relief the contestations between the old and the new forms of resistance, as it also seem to, at times, mediate between them. It is hoped that these contestations give rise to the hitherto 'missing feminist counter public'.

The significance of context, of historical continuities and collectivities that frame social media use, seem to emerge clearly from our work in the CITIGEN research.