

SESSION IX - Pointers from CITIGEN - What do we need to take away for theory and practice

This session presented a review and assessment of CITIGEN's research and conceptual contributions from scholars new to the network.

Reflections from:

*Ranjita Mohanty, Consultant, Local Governance Initiative, Swiss Co-operation Office India & Visiting Scholar, University of Western Cape, South Africa
Shakun Daundiyakhed, Programme Coordinator, Vimochana, India*

Moderator: *Desiree Lewis, Think piece author, CITIGEN, and Associate Professor, University of the Western Cape, South Africa*

ψψψ

Ranjita Mohanty - Consultant, Local Governance Initiative, Swiss Co-operation Office India & Visiting Scholar, University of Western Cape, South Africa

Ranjita began by saying that she hoped her comments would help the group think through some of the concepts mentioned in the discussions so far. She said that she would look at some key concepts from a citizenship perspective that might help revisit the idea and assumptions this project is working on.

One of the core issues of discussion, she said, was the interaction between cyberactivism, online feminist activism and the real world. Even if we are theorising about ICTs, gender and citizenship, we need to understand what is the positioning of ICTs vis-à-vis the positioning of the older media – how do they intersect, where do they remain separate, what do they borrow from each other and give to each other. Looking at ICTs activism alone, she felt, would be very limited. Ranjita mentioned that she would cover four key components of citizenship that have been generated through activism and citizenship research through the years and within those look at the issues relating to cyberactivism.

The key areas were:

1. Looking at the area of identity construction - Who is the citizen? How is a citizenship identity constructed? What are the components of it? What kind of methods? Who is doing what? Who is boundary keeping? What kind of safe spaces are constructed?
2. The terms and conditions under which citizenship practice takes place.

3. Mapping of the points of interface that the powerful actors made, whether the state, the corporates or the society or whosoever that people are pitching against.
4. How do citizens and the actors they are interfacing with them, mutually constitute each other?

Firstly, visiting the notion of identity, Ranjita said that three categories emerged from the point of view of poor women who are part of struggles. The first is that there is an online space and a physical space between which the actors are moving back and forth. They are using different kinds of strategies for communication and for networking and activism. This needs to be nuanced to begin to really see what is happening when these actors as they move through spaces - sometimes sequentially, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes with substantial time gaps. We need to understand more clearly what really happens when this kind of an activism takes place.



Ranjita Mohanty

Another scenario, she said, was that of a conflict or when there is physical danger of being in the field, and the actors concentrate mostly on the online, not because they do not want to engage but the physical space is simply being closed or is too life threatening. In that particular context online activism is the only hope to get across their thoughts.

The third point she made was that a lot of the struggle takes place in the physical space but simultaneously there exists a cyber space. There

is a need to tease out and see who are the actors which constitute the two different spheres. It is not necessarily true that the actors who are in the real physical world are also a part of this cyberactivism. Some actors may intersect, transcend and span both the worlds but in online activism especially those using tools such as Facebook and Twitter, there exists a population which will not go out in the real world. To have access to the Internet is a privilege, and in some ways an expression of a class position. The poor women struggling will not have these resources whereas the people who are online are privileged to those kind of resources. The question then is - Is their construct of citizenship similar? If not, then what is the difference?

One of the crucial differences in cyberactivism is that it is largely disembodied and alienates itself from the capitalist context. Those who are flocking the cyberspace for solidarity are not necessarily the people carrying out the real struggle. It is good to know so many people support a cause but they are not present when the activism is taking place. This difference is very crucial to examine. Again we can ask here - is this is a new kind of construction of the citizenship identity? These disembodied selves who are clicking and saying we 'like' this, can they be ignored or overlooked if they are situated in a different material and social sphere? Are they emerging as a different kind of online 'netizen'?

The second issue is understanding the terms and conditions that the citizenship practice is enacted within. What we find in the struggles that take place in the material world is that nothing is given. What are then some of the preconditions for practising citizenship? One is information. You have to know what kind of information is there for you to act like a citizen. The second is the skill to collectivise. Not necessarily everyone knows how to collectivise and 20 people meeting is not necessarily like collectivising. So what are those skills one needs and the material support required? This might be done with the support of civil society or by themselves but the reality is that these are preconditions.

In the real world the space of activism is bound by society and the powerful actors one is pitching against. One of the theories of civil society by Neera Chandhoke says that while one is practising the citizens right to speech and expression and to collectivise - in the physical

space there are norms which need to be followed. For example, you cannot be violent. The moment you become violent, you are transgressing the boundaries set by the state and your legitimacy can be questioned. So how do actors protect their legitimacy in this bounded space, needs to be understood. Also what are the preconditions and the boundaries in the cyberspace? The discussions have covered the issues of privacy and of surveillance but maybe there are more that we have not even begun talking about. It would be interesting to see the preconditions and terms and conditions under which surveillance happens for example.

Ranjita's next point was regarding interface. It is argued that in the context of global activism you cannot have everyone come together and strategise and communicate, hence a lot of that communication and strategy building takes place in the online space but we would still need an Occupy movement, a World Social Forum and a space where all the ministerial gatherings take place because that is the point of interface. Here, one has to be careful not to confuse between the methods and strategy building and the actual interface that happens vis-à-vis the actor claiming the right. You have to be there to be seen and the numbers have to be large.

The last point is how the citizens and the forces they are fighting against, mutually constitute each other. As the citizens strategise and build their online communication, do we know how the other party is responding? Are they building alternative strategies? Do they know you? Are they aware of the threat? In the physical world of activism you can see how the state and corporate respond to you and what kind of strategies they make and there is a cycle where the citizens respond and the state responds and so on. Yet in the Internet do we know if there is a response? This is to say that it could be one sided communication - we are communicating a lot among ourselves as fellow citizens and activists but how much of that is taken cognisance of and responded to by the actors we are pitching against?

Shakun Daundiyakhed - Programme Coordinator, Vimochana, India

Shakun began by saying that was work with Vimochana which has modelled itself as a feminist group which responds to violence. The



core area of their work is to reach out to women who are facing all forms of violence – whether it is in the community or a case of domestic violence at home – women of all classes and all locations are covered.



Shakun D.

She mentioned that she would attempt to flag points where the issues at hand intersect with Vimochana's work.

Vimochana works with individuals and has an outreach programme in two communities where women's suicide was very high. One is a predominantly Muslim community, the other is a migrant community. The

organisation undertakes surveys with these groups and one of their conclusions was that data greatly differs when outsiders collect it, from when the women themselves collect their data. Shakun took the example of a survey undertaken of 150 women on street prostitution by 6 women from within the group. Some very interesting insights came up which had not come up before. Women, for example, confessed that they enjoyed having sex with their partners/husbands the most, which was fascinating because usually they exploit them the most. Also while it was suspected that most women would be from the lower castes their data would not clearly reflect this until the organisation collected an application for a housing scheme where women actually revealed their castes. Shakun asked that in the case of such information where the individual was studying the self - would this kind of data be evinced in an online space?

Vimochana also uses community radio in Bengaluru which has a 10-15 kms. radius and covers the Muslim community of women they work with. In about a month of establishing it, women were speaking freely on several issues – the mafia that managed their region, how they negotiated PHCs etc. They also have a website which, Shakun confessed, was difficult to maintain as the organisation is small, catering to a large population and resources are stretched. She also added that considering the discussions around 'invited spaces' – Vimochana, having observed the need for spaces to vocalise women's issues, began having open courts of hearings for women where different stakeholders were called in to listen and participate. This, she

felt, becomes an 'invited space' where policy makers are asked to listen and reflect on the policy suggestions.

She put forward her concern with digital spaces by quoting Audre Lorde – the masters tools will never destroy the masters house. In every sphere of work that one wishes to change there is a need to push borders. There was, she said, a need to look for transformative justice instead of retributive justice.

She ended with a quote for feminists: A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends and dips her wings in the orange sunrise and dares to claim the sky.

Discussion:

Desiree, the moderator of the session, began the discussion by summing that both speakers had concentrated on how feminist activism complicates the way we theorise around ICTs and feminism. In many ways the discussions went back to issues raised by Heike and other people. Ranjita for example pointed to the reality of the digital divide. We also need to think about the issues that the tools we are trying to use are precisely the tools that are used by global capitalism, patriarchy etc. Shakun also highlighted that the tools used by feminists can often work against them.

Srilatha asked Ranjita – if somewhere there is an implicit assumption that, citizenship is only expressed through activism? She asked this in relation to the debates of the 80-90s about passive citizenship. If one takes the example of *sanghas* which are acting on informal systems lets say customary systems and institution through which they are negotiating their lives, do we not call those as expressions of citizenship? They are not directed at the state.

The other point she made was regarding the resources one needs to act as a citizen. An important one she felt was 'enabling conditions'.

Sarala agreed with Srilatha and said how in their own work they had tried conducting some research on the impact of women's peace activism in Sri Lanka and it was felt that protests could be measured by presence. Yet women

protest in differing ways and that is not the only space of resistance. Sarala also added that she appreciated the conversation of the norms of and boundaries of public activism mentioned by Ranjita. She asked what those norms were in terms of virtual activism.

Parminder felt that Ranjita's presentation helped flag a lot of important points when one is faced with the network society scenario. Questions to ask are - What are the skills in these new spaces? Whether there are resources available? And if yes, then what happens? The good part is that it is still a space under construction. Its vocabulary, its semiotics, its boundaries - are being defined right now. So the question is - what is our contribution?

We cannot always contribute but we can identify the actors like open source groups or such groups which are helping the space to build in a certain manner and hence we know that our fights lie in these directions. Though most of the open movements mostly tend to equalise the playing field, we know that it should be a more proactive construction which goes beyond the openness movement. Similarly, regarding the point on the actual interfaces where the policy changes can take place - this is also a problem in the online space.

Regarding Shakun's presentation, Parminder felt that the kind of descriptions she gave of how actual resistance take place, should always be kept in mind and there is need to keep learning from such experiences. When we remove ourselves from that space we will make a mistake. Those narratives are very important every time we decide to take a step.

Ranjita replied to the comments by saying that one way to build citizenship was also to build a space of one's own away from the preying eyes of the state, and it is not necessary that every act is to connect to or challenge the state. But in rights claiming the state comes into play. Of course there is a localised context in which citizenship takes place but there is also an overarching one and no matter what people say of the disappearance of the nation state, there is a nation state and it is becoming increasingly strong and overbearing. So how do we act out citizenship activism there? What is enabled in a democratic polity is that there is a space to act.

Otherwise you'd have to do your citizenship act underground. So that is the enabling environment that a democratic polity provides by giving you a set of rights. At the same time, no liberty is unbounded. Who bounds it is the entity that gives you the right. It is to be understood where the boundaries come from and its not that they are never to be broken. They are broken but nonetheless it helps to accept that there are boundaries. What kind of boundaries the cyber space needs and what feminist activists can take from their own practice to this sphere, will evolve. It is an area that needs to be given serious thought.

Once concern about cyber space is that it is evolving everyday. So how do you build capabilities to enter that space? You build on the earlier capabilities but you also require newer capabilities. It changes even faster than the physical space which more or less remains the same for sometime. When we talk about terms and conditions, that is one of the challenges that needs to be thought about. How do we learn and cope with new technologies?

Shakun added an example from her experience regarding how much more proactive the lobbies of the corporate are than civil society, in responding to the issues in their environment.

Gurumurthy Kasinathan directed a question to Shakun asking - if there were any tools which were not the 'master's' tools. If the tools are used against the master does he have the choice to appropriate those tools also for the very process of oppression? Do we describe something as the 'master's tools' and leave it at that?

Shakun replied by saying that she did not think so. She felt that the digital should become one of the many ways of functioning and not the sole.

Srilatha flagged the fact that construction of norms itself had to be interrogated. Including by feminists - there existed a need to revisit their own norm construction which has generally been very exclusivist. This is deeply problematic. One of the biggest master's tools in fact is the human rights framework. They were constructed by white Western men but some co-construction has taken place. We need to interrogate that and put it on our collective agenda.