



ICT Access for women from the margins

Lessons from Sri Lanka

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Though Sri Lanka presents itself as a country that has high social development indicators, there is a significant gap between men and women, in their access to resources and to avenues of decision making. A glimpse into gender disaggregated data, for key economic, social and political spheres, clearly reveals that there are still many hurdles to be crossed before the full realisation of women's rights becomes possible in the Sri Lankan context - both in the conflict affected north and east, and in the south. Data on women's participation and representation in the political arena and the high prevalence of structural and social violence against women, require that we place Sri Lanka's 'achievements' in a critical perspective.

Sri Lankan women continue to face challenges in ensuring state compliance with international treaties and conventions such as the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). Three decades of war have significantly changed household and family structures, with an unprecedented increase in the number of female headed households to approximately 24% of the population. This signals an urgent need to address the concerns of women across age groups.



The fast changing economic, social and cultural environment also highlights changing perceptions and articulations of social norms relating to sexuality in general, and to gender and sexual identities, in particular. The emergence of women as decision makers at the level of the single-parent household, together with women's increasing visibility in the wider socio-economic arenas, signals the need to examine how emerging identities and relationships are engendered. This would further dialogue and debate for better policy and practice to enhance women's rights in the country.

As can be expected, in the mainstream media, informed perspectives on these emerging issues are very few. However, there is evidence that new media is opening up hitherto unexplored avenues for communication, both for individual women and women's organisations. As part of the CITIGEN programme, the Women in Media Collective (WMC) researched women's engagement with different forms of new media in the Sri Lankan context, focusing particularly on those women located at the margins of the nation-state. Margins here refer to the margins of political processes, knowledge creation, access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), language and discourse, as well as mainstream development processes.

The research study explored the following areas: the engagement of women through the state *Nenasala* (community telecentres) programmes for improving access to ICTs in rural areas; the experiences of local women's groups using SMS technologies to run a local women's news network; women's experiences in campaigning for local elections across five districts; and the experiences of Sinhala and Tamil language women bloggers in their engagement with new media. The findings from the research, especially those that provide insights on the impact of state ICT policies on women's engagement with new media, are discussed briefly in this document.

Nenasala: Women's experiences in state initiated ICT programmes

The e-Sri Lanka programme, initiated in 2002 as a key tool for promoting economic growth and national integration, was the first comprehensive plan for the development of ICTs in Sri Lanka. This programme enabled the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector and service provisioning, also enhancing ICT use in business and educational sectors. It also provided an enabling environment for the Telecentre Family Project of *Sarvodaya*: an NGO initiated programme under which 1000 telecentres (*Nenasalas*) were set up around the country, to encourage community participation – specifically targeting youth, children and farmers. The telecentres were to focus on telemedicine, e-commerce, e-governance etc. The media used to create awareness included provincial forums and brainstorming sessions, use of a social networking site (<http://telecentrefamily.ning.com/>), and blogging.

WMC's research revealed that though the *Nenasalas* had opened up new work opportunities for women and enabled the emergence of a social space for women's learning to emerge in some communities, it is still a difficult struggle for women to negotiate their social roles and effectively participate in such spaces. Women's access issues were not a part of the conscious design of the *Nenasalas*. This is not surprising, when we analyse the e-Sri Lanka programme and other national level ICT policies through a gender lens. We see that the strategic use of ICTs for women's empowerment, by national policies and bodies that target women, has not been clearly articulated.

Thus, the mere availability of ICTs does not mean that access is ensured to women and girls. Agencies such as the Ministry for Women's Empowerment have a vital role to play in mobilising women to access, control and

create content in relation to ICTs.

Minmini Seithihal SMS news network: Challenging the mainstream

Minmini Seithihal (Fireflies News) is an SMS based women's news network that is exploring and experimenting with using media for and by women in one of the eastern districts of Sri Lanka. Right from the outset, *Minmini Seithihal* has focussed on how women are located on the margins of socio-political discourse.

The network aims to change the ideology around who can access and share news, who can be in the news, and who can make news. It has enabled women to take control of receiving information and sharing information within their own homes, work places and in other social settings. It also provides an important space in which to raise the issue of violence against women at the district level.

WMC's research revealed that for the women involved in the SMS news network, the creation, control and access to news was very empowering. The SMS technology enabled women to move beyond barriers to mobility, navigate power hierarchies and access information. The network has managed to create a new social collective – a new techno-social reality, that is re-negotiating traditional boundaries of the media space, knowledge space as well as geographic space.

Clearly, this has opened a whole new arena of engagement for poor and marginalised women in learning, peer-to-peer networking and collaborative knowledge production. The case of *Minmini Seithihal* demonstrates the need to explore the platforms that ICTs offer for challenging mainstream discourses and in local claims-making.

The Changing Minds campaign: Structural issues in women's political participation

As part of the research study, WMC also examined the ways in which women engage with the question of representation in the national political arena. WMC launched a media campaign aimed at raising awareness about the importance of increasing women's participation and representation in mainstream politics, focusing initially on local government, over a period leading up to the elections of March 2011. As part of the campaign, WMC launched 'Changing Minds' (<http://srilankawomeninpolitics.blogspot.com>), a blog to feature female candidates from five districts (Galle, Monaragala, Badulla, Kurunegala and Trincomalee) who wished to contest the elections. An action

research study followed the evolution and the mode of implementation of the campaign.

The analysis of the WMC campaign experience demonstrates that to some extent, the campaign succeeded in mainstreaming the idea that women should be involved in local as well as national governments. However, in the 2011 local government elections, there was no significant increase in nominations from women candidates or in the number of women elected to local government. The required structural change will take place only with a sustained and strong advocacy campaign by many actors at many levels. However, new media certainly provides tools, spaces and a voice for collective action. This campaign experience clearly demonstrates the need to move towards a policy framework that is cognisant of the structures of the information society within which ICTs are embedded, rather than one which sees ICTs as mere tools for growth and development.

A gender audit of Sinhala blogs

One of the components of the research study was a gender audit of the latest 100 posts in two different Sinhala language blog aggregators. The audit results showed that Sinhala language women bloggers largely focussed on blogging personal diary entries and posting creative writing. It also revealed that women bloggers showed lesser competencies in promoting their blogs through online marketing compared to their male counterparts. A meeting with women bloggers that was convened by WMC, after the gender audit, revealed that women bloggers need to further educate themselves on both the technical and privacy aspects of blogging. Making women aware of privacy issues online becomes especially important in a context where women have been subjected to harassment and violence in ICT-enabled platforms. This is also an area that policy makers need to take cognisance of.

Policy recommendations

Based on WMC's research and knowledge of the Sri Lankan context, the following recommendations are being made:

1. Making policies for an information society, and not just ICT growth

In terms of policy, governments need to recognise ICTs as relevant not only to the economic sector, but also to democracy, development and social transformation. Design of large scale projects like *Nenasalas* requires such a shift in approach. Policy makers should move

towards an information society policy framework which recognises that information gate-keeping is gendered at various levels. It takes place in homes and communities where local patriarchies mediate women's access to public information. Community telecentre initiatives should focus on the needs and contexts of marginalised women from the design stage.

2. Gendering ICT policies at the national level

An analysis of the national policy frameworks in Sri Lanka clearly reveals that they are gender neutral. The strategic use of ICTs for the empowerment of women, by national policies and bodies that target women, have not been clearly articulated. Ideally, a gender analysis needs to be integrated in the overall processes that lead to the adoption of key policy initiatives.

3. Capacity building of grassroots women leaders

An important policy recommendation is to move towards a sustained use of ICTs to build the capacities of local governance and women's engagement with local government processes. This should include building capacity about the use of ICTs for networking, information sharing, connecting with constituencies etc.

4. Protecting women from violence on ICT-based platforms

There is an urgent need for a deeper discussion on how ICTs have been used to further victimise women and girls in terms of violence and harassment. Women have had experiences of cyber stalking, hidden surveillance, e-mail tampering, etc., through GPS tracking devices and video. Policy makers need to understand that the responses for curbing violence against women through ICTs should be at many levels; state regulation and censorship, as well as self-regulation by the digital media/Internet industry. More importantly, there should be education on self protection and privacy for women as well as the creation of counter discourses, a good example of which is the British Columbia Rural Women's Network sponsored Online Safety Toolkit.

5. Creating a facilitative climate for knowledge sharing

ICT policies should be based on the notion of 'collective intelligence'¹. This is in relation to both computer software and programming as well as knowledge production and sharing in general. Commons based peer production should be encouraged for collaboration and sharing, access to free information and technologies, engaging with policy processes, and

to promote activism around cultural production. Open source software enables many collaborative initiatives, especially for rural women. There should be significant support for community based projects enabling poor women to create, share and broadcast knowledge, especially in local languages.

6. Acknowledging the need for a strong public information infrastructure

The state should provide ICT related infrastructure as a public utility. ICT projects cannot be solely business oriented, but should also help strengthen local institutions and development processes. Public information infrastructures can have the mandate to be responsive to marginalised women or the poor, whereas privatised ICT services will not. Such infrastructures should include facilities to use ICTs, like SMSes and social media, for building plural local media

spaces. Again, a redesign of large scale government supported projects along these lines is critical.

7. Interpreting the e-governance mandate as more than mere 'service provisioning'

In 2010, the Sri Lankan government adopted the eGovernment Policy on ICT usage in government to make "government more efficient and effective, improve access to government services, and create a more citizen centric government"². However, at this stage, there is no official recognition of ICTs as a vehicle for social transformation of rural and poor communities. Even the government websites are not designed to be interactive spaces. This needs to be changed. Policymakers need to focus on building opportunities for citizens to hold government offices accountable and demand transparency, through the e-governance initiatives they design.

Endnotes:

1. Burch, S. (2010), 'Which Knowledge for Rural Development?', Paper presented at the Meeting of the Asia Research Network, IT for Change: Bengaluru.
2. We refer to the eGovernment Policy 2009 (adopted by the Sri Lankan Parliament in 2010), pertaining to the policy and procedure for ICT use in government.

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