Think Piece Summaries

The Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the context, practice and normative basis of marginalised women's citizenship in the emerging information society. It seeks to study the changing terrain of rights, entitlements and agency framing marginalised women's participation in the emerging social relationships architecture effected by new technologies. The research, located in Asia, is being undertaken as a collaborative effort between research scholars and feminist organisations, and is being coordinated by IT for Change. It is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Participating teams have used different methodological approaches to conduct enquiries across sites in China - Hong Kong, Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Hong Kong - Taiwan.

The programme has also brought in scholars and practitioners from outside the region for a wider dialogue, inviting them to contribute think pieces that study the intersections between micro ecologies of information and communication and macro structures. This document provides a snapshot of these think pieces.

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Women and virtual citizenship? Gendered experiences of censorship and surveillance

Heike Jensen

This paper addresses women's (potential) citizenship in the information society with regard to questions of censorship and surveillance. Censorship and surveillance are practices that deeply infringe on people's freedom of expression and privacy, and hence severely limit people's chances of joining in the public sphere and exercising their citizenship rights.

The swift spread of the Internet and other digital media has significantly altered the nature of public exchanges and public spheres. Therefore, it is now imperative to investigate these new realities in terms of the structural opportunities and constraints they have created: Whose views are being amplified and whose views get silenced? Who can act unobserved and who is placed under surveillance? Investigating these questions from a gender perspective includes looking for pervasive changes in women's relationships to, and experiences of, censorship and surveillance, which this paper does, with a particular emphasis on the highly contested issues of sexuality and morality. Since the detection of changes requires a baseline, the first part of the paper addresses censorship and surveillance as gendered phenomena from a historical perspective and beyond digital contexts, while the second part focuses on the continuities and changes created by the new digital media.

Censorship, surveillance and the public beyond digital contexts

Censorship and surveillance are often thought of as practices engaged in by nation states directly. However, censorship effects in any given nation may be triggered by several distinct causes. Beyond censorship law and its enforcement or outright violence, these include media administration that allows only some entities to establish media, commercial set-ups that systematically favour specific forms of business and the viewpoints made prevalent by them, technological features built into the relevant means of communication, and social norms that effectively silence parts of the population. Similarly, surveillance effects may be caused by a corresponding range of agents. Surveillance in turn may lead people who are its targets to censor themselves.

From a gender perspective, particularly when investigating censorship and surveillance directed at women, a consideration of the whole range of agents and scenarios is vital. It shows that many women in many nations have encountered censorship and surveillance in the private sphere. Most crucially, women's and girls' activities have been policed by men – and also by women – who are socially close to them in order to protect the heterosexualised love contract or the family honour that structure many patriarchal societies in the North and South respectively. Simultaneously, women have encountered strong censorship blocks in the public sphere, which in fact has been defined by their exclusion from it. Historically, this kind of public sphere has originated in the West, and it has been built on news media as commercial enterprises, which have marginalised women both ideologically and materially. Thus, the news media that have created and maintained the public sphere have acted as further central censorship agents for women, contributing to the idea that women are anomalous political actors or seldom rational citizens at best, particularly if they are associated with feminist stances. Concurrently, commercial set-ups in patriarchal nations have put the majority of women at a disadvantage compared to men in terms of gaining decision-making power and ownership of media. While women as a gender group have been marginalised politically and commercially, many nations, or rather the dominant class fractions that have claimed the right to speak for these nations, have adopted idealised women, as the symbols of the nation. Attempts at censoring women have consequently included the argument that these women, in deviating from the feminine ideal and the moral order, would betray their nations.

Men, meanwhile, have not encountered any similar censorship or surveillance with respect to gendered state ideologies or the private sphere. They have furthermore been acknowledged as legitimate actors in the public and commercial spheres. The censorship and surveillance of men can hence most fruitfully be understood to play important roles in negotiating hierarchies between different groups of men, whether based on political or religious persuasions, class, race or other markers.

The information society

Digital media in general and Web 2.0 applications in particular, have enabled many women (and other marginalised people and groups) to overcome certain forms of censorship and surveillance. A crucial thematic area in which women have seized the new opportunities for self-exploration, self-expression and the creation of communities is that of sexuality. Women have, in the process, challenged patriarchal cornerstones and spin-offs such as the relegation of sexuality to the private sphere, ideal femininity, morality, and pornography-as-commodity. However, the question remains if these initiatives have been, or will be able, to create counter public spheres of sorts, and to exert progressive political impacts on the gender order of any given nation. At the same time, the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been used by men to harm women in such a pervasive manner that an entirely new sphere of violence against women has been created. This sphere is squarely characterised by privacy invasions, by the stripping away of women's right to informational self-determination with the express intent of sexually harassing, blackmailing or harming women.

Structurally at a deeper level, Web 2.0's widespread operation by private business has commoditised all the initiatives undertaken on it, in specific ways. While traditional mass media/news media have 'only' sold their users' attention and broad demographics to their advertisers, Web 2.0 platforms are in the position to also capitalise on in-depth analyses of their users' digital behaviour and trails as well as digital networks, thus monetising even human relationships. This creates a new dimension in the history of public spheres run by private companies, which potentially hollows out the prerequisites for a free and open political exchange between citizens. In addition, hegemonic business masculinity is boosted on the basis of privacy invasions, while the whole sector of 'security' becomes an incredibly augmented, predominantly male career path, because of the new forms and depths of surveillance enabled by digital tools. At the state level, the area of sexuality and morality has lent itself particularly well for the reassertion of sovereignty through censorship currently undertaken by many nations. This is because distinctly national discourses and problems exist, which still, at times, allow room for international collaboration. Often, governments have adopted paternalistic frameworks of sexuality, claiming to protect women and children in order to legitimise forms of Internet regulation and censorship that have gone much beyond the issues at hand, and the groups supposed to be protected have not systematically been strengthened at all.

Concluding thoughts

The introduction and spread of digital media has altered and augmented the kinds of public exchanges and political organising that citizens may engage in, by providing what may amount to additional public spheres. So far, digital media have erased some censorship blocks for some groups of people, but they have simultaneously erected other censorship blocks. More pervasively, they have spread neo-liberal business logics and models of revenue generation that erode privacy. The thematic field of sexuality can be considered a prime area in which the struggle over gendered forms of self-determination, self-expression and control has unfolded in public spheres, including those created by Web 2.0 platforms. This struggle is embedded in the increasing sexualisation of everyday life which is spearheaded by the advertising industries, including those that finance many Web 2.0 platforms to constantly create sexualised desires.

If unchecked, a repressive patriarchal order may hence develop or be furthered in nations on the basis of widespread sexualised privacy invasions perpetrated against women, even as women's freedom of expression may theoretically be enhanced by the opportunities offered by digital media. Thus, women's enjoyment of their citizenship status hinges on strong initiatives to further both their communication rights and their privacy rights in all public spheres, be they digitally mediated or not, and to protect these rights against all agents that potentially infringe on them, be it private individuals, companies or governments.

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Internet rights and netizen sub-culture: Gender perspectives on political transformation in Thailand

Supinya Klangnarong

This paper examines the role of the Internet in opening up spaces for citizens to participate actively in the political life of the nation, and the engendering of such spaces, through a snapshot of the current usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Thailand.

The Internet plays a significant role in opening up spaces for citizens, regardless of their gender, to participate in political, economic, social and cultural life. However, since Thailand has been experiencing a crisis relating to the transformation of its political system (presently a constitutional monarchy), the main focus of the current public discourse is on civil and political rights. Gender and feminist perspectives do not get as much critical attention in analyses of the transformations brought about by the new ICTs; instead, they are mostly viewed as mechanisms that promote equal life chances. In an attempt to move away from the position of viewing ICTs as an end in themselves, the paper raises the question of how the promotion of better access to ICTs can contribute to the promotion of democracy and sustainable development, for both men and women.

Access to ICTs in Thailand

Internet access statistics in Thailand are much lower than other South East Asian countries. The Internet is not as prevalent as television or other traditional media. Statistics reveal that only 7 per 100 households have access to computers while colour TVs are present in 95.5 of 100 households[1]. However, even with limited Internet access, Web 2.0 applications such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and international blog-hosting services like Blogspot have emerged as important spaces for political expression, including messages implicitly opposing the monarchy.

Gender and Internet access

There is evidence that once Internet access is established in private homes, men and women have equal access to ICTs. A recent survey on Internet usage in Thailand[2] found that a typical Internet user in Thailand is a female student, aged 20-29, living in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Re-visiting these statistics from the other side of the social divide, we find that uneducated women in the rural areas have less access to the Internet than their better off peers in the urban centres. However, studies also reveal a similar pattern for male users: good access in the urban centres and poor access in the rural periphery. Thus, the numbers do not suggest any significant divide between men and women in terms of Internet access.

Gender limitations in ICT use

If access to ICTs are guaranteed, do men and women have equal opportunities to make use of the full potential of ICTs? In other words, are there any legal, economic, social or cultural factors that prevent women (or men) to explore the new opportunities opened up by ICTs? Both women and men suffer from a severe curtailment of their Internet freedoms because of state censorship and control of Internet freedoms, in Thailand's current political context. However, the patrimonial Thai culture places additional barriers to women's free expression in online spaces, especially as women face tougher social consequences in expressing controversial views online and offline. On the other hand, it is important to also acknowledge that access to online and social media opens up new spaces for checking the patrimonial bias of Thai mainstream and traditional media.

Another significant issue is the gender-blindness of ICTs policy documents. At present, ICTs policy documents in Thailand have neither included strategies for increasing women's access to ICTs nor institutionalised capacity building programmes for women's empowerment. This lacuna needs to be addressed if women are to utilise the new spaces opened up by ICTs effectively.

The limitations of freedom of expression in Thailand

Control over the Internet in Thailand is already a cause for serious concern. *Reporters Sans Frontieres* (RSF) located in Paris, who monitor freedom of the press, ranked Thailand as one of the countries under surveillance because the Thai government perceives the Internet as a political enemy. In RSF's report,

'Countries under Surveillance' (2011), the level of freedom of the media in Thailand, has dropped to 153rd in ranking from 130th in 2009.

Strict Internet blocking and control has arisen because of several reasons. Given that websites criticising or analysing the role of the monarchy have increased in number since the coup on 19th September 2006, the government has pursued measures to stop their growth. Although less than half the population has access to the Internet, the government is concerned that this can strengthen the voice of the opposition. Therefore, the government uses censorship, as it believes that this measure can curtail the voice of criticism. However, even in the face of severe censorship and state control, online spaces have played a key role in the political life of the country. This can be clearly seen when we examine the political resistance being built by Internet users or netizens who are members of the Thai Netizen Network (TNN), in order to counter government restrictions and control over the freedom to access and express using online spaces. ICTs offer the potential for blending citizens with differing group affiliations into the common identity of a 'netizen'.

A case study of the Thai Netizen Network

The Thai Netizen Network (TNN) consists of individuals from various sectors including computer-geeks, small and medium entrepreneurs, social and political activists, academicians, lawyers, web masters, students and journalists. The founders include prominent individuals from social-venture organisations such as Siam Intelligence Unit, ChangeFusion, OpenDream, Thoth Media, etc. The political views and affiliations among the network members are diverse, yet they have similar beliefs on the issue of freedom of expression. This sub-culture of Thai netizens is encouraged by the concept of free culture and open society, and despite the restricting laws and mainstream cultural norms, some of the netizens remain confident about defending cyber-liberty in Thailand. Nonetheless, mobilisation towards political actions is rather slow. This may be because consensus is difficult to achieve as Internet communities are rarely a hub of people aligned along similar terms. Also, while the Internet allows individual citizens to engage virtually in online activism based on their interest through hundreds of web pages and applications, tangible action such as street protests or hunger strikes requires a different political commitment.

The political use of the Internet is very significant in democratic participation but it could also contribute to political apathy. Nonetheless, TNN has been able to create and sustain a sub-culture of netizens, who value the concept of 'free culture'. As a value, such a free culture facilitates openness and helps in bridging the gap between genders. When men and women have become active netizens and adopted free culture values, their gender status is no longer a barrier to connecting and sharing.

Conclusion

The open and equal culture that the Internet facilitates, empowers women in several ways. Firstly, the very practice of interacting across social and gender lines strengthens both the capacity and self esteem of women. The practice of communication in terms of deliberation, negotiation and the vocalisation of grievance and interests is a powerful way to strengthen women and open up spaces for women's leadership. Secondly, the collective phenomenon of online social interactions seems to dissolve the boundaries constructed to uphold hierarchies, including gendered power structures. Policies therefore need to reduce the obstacles to access ICTs in order to allow all genders to enjoy the use of ICTs for a more fulfilling social, political and economic life.

Endnotes:

1. The Economist (2010), *The Pocket World in Figures 2010 Edition*, The Economist Newspaper LLC.

2. Ministry of Science and Technology (2009), *Internet User Profile of Thailand 2009*, Bangkok: Government of Thailand

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Digital activism and violence against women: Changing landscapes of feminist activism in Southern Africa

Desiree Lewis and Crystal Orderson

Our paper aims to explore innovative routes for action against gender based violence in South Africa, especially through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for cultural expression, information-sharing, lobbying and resistance. In an age where the Internet and digital communication play a revolutionary role, the question of how African regions with limited connectivity have been able to extend and transform conventional understandings of digital-based feminist activism needs to be unpacked. We have followed a largely qualitative approach in our study, with ethnography and discourse analysis as key methodologies. Some of our arguments, of course, draw support from secondary literature and empirical observation. Our study moves in-between the local, national and regional levels with the aim of teasing out the national and regional implications of local platforms that support activism that questions Violence Against Women (VAW).

Violence against women as a key site of feminist activism

It is important to identify the reasons behind the escalating violence against women in the post-colonial African context. Focussing especially on Africa's biggest economy, South Africa, we examine the rationalising myths that dominate public discourse around such violence, and the challenges which such myths pose to feminism, women in communities and to poor women.

We raise the question of the importance of the content, sites and forms of effective communication about and around gender-based violence. We have tried to demonstrate that a culture of silence and a culture of legitimation have normalised violence, ensuring that large numbers of women remain trapped in syndromes of disempowerment, silence and complicity. In such a context, we find that communication about rights, forums that provide spaces for women's voices, and solidarity networks have to play a key role in countering gender based violence.

Limits of mainstream communication networks

VAW constitutes a key site for feminist activism in South Africa. We present a case study of mainstream print media reporting on sexuality issues and gender violence in South Africa during 2007-2008. This period can be seen to 'test' the efficacy of the mainstream print media's coverage of sexual violence in the wake of the dramatic rape trial implicating the current South African President, Jacob Zuma. The case study demonstrates how media coverage of sexuality issues remains conservative. In spite of the visibility that mainstream media brings to the issues of sexuality, sexual health and sexual rights, the coverage distorts or even excludes women's perspectives and voices, especially those of rural and poor women. Even when we turn to 'alternative' communication sites, most notably the highly visible organisation, Gender Links (or the African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre), it becomes clear that the mere use of new media does not automatically guarantee the inclusion of marginalised women's voices and opportunities for their agency. The functioning of organisations such as these indicates how ostensibly feminist projects can implicitly reinforce developmentalist agendas that suppress the agency and voice of many women.

Case studies of feminist ICT activism

Against this backdrop, we take up two sets of questions through two case studies of feminist ICT activism.

a.How can alternative feminist action – through civil society and cultural expression – systematically and radically confront violence against women in African contexts?

b.Compared to the top-down, patriarchal, Western-centric or elitist trends of many mass media forms including the print media, how can the digital strategies of NGOs facilitate intervention, lobbying and activism that is radical, subversive and democratic?

1. Feminist activism, performance and new media from the University of the Western Cape

We examine two plays launched at the University of

the Western Cape (UWC), a historically black South African university - *Reclaiming the P Word* and *Khululekani Emakhaya*. Both plays incorporate personal testimonies and life histories about violence and women's resistance. As an African alternative to Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, the play *Reclaiming the P Word*, raises the importance of race and class in African women's embodied experiences. With each version of the play, therefore, various monologues deal with women's raced, classed and gendered circumstances in relation to violence. Moreover, each monologue is conceptualised as a process of healing and transformation, by tracing women's experiences of shame, trauma and violence, alongside their ability to see their bodies and themselves in new radical ways. The play *Khululekani Emakhaya* incorporates many stories of women experiencing violence within or despite the 'sanctuary' of the 'home'. When *Reclaiming the P Word* was first taken to the national theatre festival in Grahamstown, it was publicised mainly through Twitter, Facebook, text messages, multi-media messaging and emails. The use of social media as a platform for communicating the play's meaning to various audiences and for discussions turned out to be as important, and sometimes more so, than the live individual performances. The experience of the producers of *Khululekani Emakhaya* is similar. In fact, even the idea for this play emerged from communication over digital platforms. Thus, a connection has been established between the old traditional performance genre of stage plays and 'new' forms of communication.

2. Feminist activism against VAW: Interfacing digitisation, community mobilisation and activism

This case study focuses on the inventiveness, eclecticism and hybridity of ICTs activism in the Western Cape, a province with the highest recorded incidence of sexual violence in South Africa. We examine a number of organisations in this province who have succeeded in employing several creative ways of communicating with their core constituency, making use of a range of new media tools. MXIT, an instant mobile messaging system, has been used by the feminist organisation Free Gender, as part of their advocacy against corrective rape. Mobisite, a special website accessible by mobile phone, is being used by the Western Cape Network on Violence Against Women, as part of their information dissemination strategy to geographically dispersed members of the network, especially those located in rural areas. Freedom Fone, a telephony software, which takes the mobile phone and marries it with audio voice menus and short messaging system, is being used by the Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), an organisation that provides safe-sex educational work with sex workers. This technology, which relies on free and open source software, manages to deliver information to communities who need it most, in an affordable manner. As these different examples demonstrate, a lack of financial resources has not stopped the organisations from employing highly creative and adventurous communication strategies. On the contrary, it is through the ingenuity of smaller NGOs and local women, whose gendered experiences are complicated by race and class, that effective forms of resistance drawing on new media seem to emerge.

Conclusion

An ongoing challenge for African feminist activists is to drive the increased access of women to the increasing global range of ICTs resources. Given the deep structural conditions that shape digital divides and make the ideal of democratised access a long-term struggle, the resourceful, skilful and eclectic uses of media described in this paper present important lessons. They debunk the idea that increased financial and technological resources entirely determine effective use of ICTs in activism. However, prioritising the future role of cell phones among marginalised African women and neglecting the 'big picture' of contemporary ICTs and digitisation would be misleading and short-sighted, since the media of mobile phones and computers are inevitably connected - both in terms of content and the technology used.

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Gender and information society in Central America: Between the immediate and the strategic scenarios

Margarita Salas

I have attempted to examine the feminist use of ICTs in Central America, a region with a history of unresolved armed conflict and a neo-liberal economic model that prioritises foreign investment over local development. I focus on four country-specific case studies (Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Costa Rica) in order to provide an overview of feminist engagement with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the Central American region.

Though feminist movements have been active in the Central American region since the 1980s, information society concerns have rarely been part of their agenda. Although there are several social organisations that conduct research for building frameworks for understanding information society issues, they usually adopt a predominantly operational and functional perspective. Of course, there are a few initiatives that focus on enhancing ICT use by marginalised groups (such as women, indigenous groups, and rural populations), but advocacy initiatives are scarce. In fact, social movement actors have generally steered away from information society debates.

Against this background, the following case studies examine specific instances where feminist movements have grappled with information society issues in the region.

Honduras: Resistance against the military coup

In a country with low rates of Internet penetration, mobile phones and community radio play a far greater role in helping people send and receive information from different parts of the country. This was the case, even during the military coup of 2009 when the democratically elected President was overthrown. During this time, the feminist movement organised a group called *Feministas en Resistencia* (Feminists in Resistance) that consistently documented the abuses of the armed forces using a video channel on You-tube. Protesting the excesses of the military regime, especially in the face of statist control of mass media, this group has continued its activities initiated in the 2009, on blogs and other online spaces. In fact, the group has even managed to transform popular perceptions of what constitutes feminist agendas.

Nicaragua: Government control of media

In a country where political power has been consolidated by an alliance between left-wing socialists and the Catholic Church, state control of mass media is high. The national government is progressively increasing its ownership of mass media and tightening censorship measures. This has led to an environment of preventive censorship in the country, especially in the case of mass media broadcasts. Hence, social organisations, especially feminist movements, have turned to online spaces to express dissent, develop campaigns and bring international pressure on relevant issues, even in the face of state persecution. Though feminist movements have used online spaces for the dissemination of their views, they have not used them for the articulation of actions. Face to face communication, as well as word of mouth, continues to be the main way to coordinate on-ground actions.

El Salvador: Real Equality Law

After twenty years of right-wing rule, when a left-wing President was elected to power, the country witnessed a renewed closeness between feminist activists and government actors, for shaping a progressive gender equity agenda. This closeness is viewed with scepticism by some sections of activists, who have concerns regarding the critical analysis that a position of extreme proximity to state power can afford. In this context, the feminist movement uses technology for its campaigns and communications. However, it has not necessarily discussed some of the strategic issues behind the use of technologies.

Costa Rica: Don't label me

Costa Rica is a country of contradictions. It is progressive in some senses; for instance, it has no army and its infant mortality statistics are paired with First World countries. On the other hand, it has minimal engagement on issues of sexuality and

women's rights. Though it has an active Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) community thinking about strategic social aspects of technology (with active participation from women), there is limited feminist analysis of the issue. In fact, despite the presence of women activists in the FOSS networks, information society issues are completely absent from the agenda of the feminist movement in Costa Rica.

Towards a feminist perspective on the information society

On the whole, the Central American feminist movement, as of now, does not play a strategic role within the information society context. Certainly, to some extent, there is appropriation and use of ICTs for various organisational purposes as well as for positioning feminist issues in the public agenda, which is in itself an exercise of citizenship. However, there is no analysis of the political implications of the use of these tools, not even at the most immediate level of privacy and online security. This failure of feminist movements to grapple with the macro-structural implications of ICTs is worrisome. On the one hand, there is an older generation of feminists who do not possess the technological knowledge that can help them grasp the implications of the new ICTs, in spite of their awareness regarding security issues arising from the use of technologies. On the other hand, the younger generations of feminist activists, who have grown up with the new ICTs, are not adequately critical. Against this background, I propose the following seven dimensions, where feminist perspectives can contribute to enrich the on-going information society policies and initiatives, in order to foster greater gender equity and social justice in the Central American societies.

Information society initiatives must hence pay attention to the following:

a. Take into account the diversity of needs and capacities of the country's population, also enabling socially marginalised groups to exercise their citizenship.

b. Engender greater flexibility in the social roles traditionally assigned to men and women and ensure that women's issues become an inalienable part of the public agenda.

c. Enable less vertical and more horizontal, participatory and democratic power and decision-making structures.

d. Instil awareness about the carbon footprint produced by the production and use of ICTs.

e. Promote open knowledge frameworks, treating technological neutrality as non-negotiable and encouraging Free and Open Source Software (FOSS).

f. Work towards the equitable distribution of economic gains from the information society, among all segments of a country's population.

g. Formulate pro-active legislation for preventing gender based violence in online spaces and develop systematic mechanisms to protect people's privacy online.

These dimensions are meant as a starting point, an example of the type of issues to be addressed within the information society. It would be of great value to discuss in each country the issues that are particularly relevant according to the national context and identify priority areas for a feminist information society agenda.

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Gender and citizenship in the information society: A perspective from Pakistan

Farida Shaheed

I explore the possibilities offered by the emerging information society paradigm in Pakistan, for women's citizenship. In particular, I address the question of how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a role in shaping the discourse of the self and citizenship in societies where loyalties continue to be given (and expected) not to the far-distant state but to the local power elites positioned at the meso-level between the state and individual citizens.

I first address the issue of how the experience of female citizenship can be understood. People's perceptions and experiences of citizenship are determined by the numerous pulls of diverse social groups to which they simultaneously belong, and from which they derive their sense of collective identity. Hence, women's experience of citizenship can be comprehended only by recognising that the control exercised by family and the local community denies them access to information, benefits, and rights that could facilitate negotiating new or expanded spaces. This control renders their experience of citizenship even more problematic than that of marginalised men. Women's sense of self is more often defined by the boundaries of such collective sub-state identities that dictate the gender regime, rather than the nation-state itself. In this context, women need to develop a citizen subjectivity before they (re)negotiate or (re)shape notions and practices of citizenship.

New ICTs and the possibility of a breakthrough for women's citizenship

The potential for ICTs to effectuate paradigmatic changes in the citizenship landscape, thus, depends on: (a) catalysing women's subjectivity as citizens, (b) facilitating women to overcome individuated isolation to engage in collective reflection and strategising, (c) encouraging women to cross over from the spaces of communication to engage with the real power structures within which their lives are embedded. In societies such as Pakistan, it is in altering the private-public nexus that ICTs offer the possibility of a breakthrough for women's citizenship. The breaching of the public-private divide by ICTs holds out the tantalising possibility of by-passing the mechanisms of patrol exercised by male (as well as some female) patriarchs, especially within the family, to offer access to seemingly infinite informational and communication resources, thereby readjusting spatial frontiers. Additionally, especially in more rigidly controlled and authoritarian dispensations, ICTs can provide platforms that can serve as public spheres of discourse and debate that are either not possible or carry high risks outside this space. For some women, they may also provide an otherwise unavailable means of engaging with the socio-political events and actors impacting their lives.

However, it is of the utmost importance to consider not merely whether and how ICTs enable a breaching and reconfiguration of gender spaces and frontiers, but what kinds of messages and dynamics enter the 'private' domain of women by means of such a breaching. Through the following case study of the 'Radio Mullah' in the Swat Province of Pakistan, I examine how the breaching of the jealously guarded borders of the traditional private-public through media can be deeply misogynistic, resulting in women making 'choices' that challenge feminists.

The Radio Mullah of Swat

In the rise of the influence of *Tehreek-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) in Swat province, Pakistan in the 1990s, Mullah Fazlullah's highly effective use of radio played a effective role. This earned him the sobriquet of Mullah Radio or FM Mullah. His call for a particularly perverted version of *jihad* (holy war) was responsible for the bombing of dozens of girls' schools and the eventual closure of all female education, the banning of women from *bazaars* (markets) and virtually all public spaces, ultimately leading to a reign of complete terror. Incredibly, women formed a large part of his constituency of supporters. How was it possible for Mullah Radio to convert women to his cause? Fazlullah inherited the leadership of the *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) (Movement to Protect Mohammad's Rule) from his father-in-law, Sufi Mohammad, who founded TNSM and aligned it with the Afghan Taliban in late 1994 when he led an armed insurrection in Malakand

Division (adjacent to Swat). Blocking the main transport arteries and kidnapping government officials and judges, his insurrection brought life to a complete standstill, effectively putting into abeyance the writ of the state. The TNSM offered little to women, and beyond the inevitable gendered discourse, women were largely invisible.

Yet women responded to FM Mullah's appeals and discourses over radio. This was because Fazlullah's strategy involved directly addressing women listeners, even while calling for strict gender segregation and the seclusion of women. Fazlullah in effect used the radio to by-pass the authority of family males, to insinuate himself into the *char diwari* (four walls) of women's 'private' world .

He brought into the women's world a sort of 'public sphere', or at least a fragment thereof, and helped to dislodge, and to some extent replace, the traditional patriarchal control over women by family men, with his own authority. Women responded in surprising numbers and with astonishing enthusiasm.

Fazlullah's allure also stemmed from his informing women that they were entitled to some rights, provided this was in the pursuit of greater glory for their religion. On this path, women's agency in disobeying husbands and opposing their views was not only permissible, it even had religious sanction. As we know from other studies, few women prioritise what are considered to be the classical rights of citizenship, starting with franchise. Of far greater and more immediate concern to most women is how to address the forces that keep them disempowered in their daily life. The case of Swat supports a rather uncomfortable conclusion; in local contexts which severely disempower women in everyday domestic life, women may be willing to 'sacrifice' their entitlements as citizens (such as voting, participating in the outside world, the physical public space) in order to gain greater decision-making powers in the everyday.

Therefore, some of the questions that the case of the Radio Mullah raises for activism are: How can activists catalyse new subjectivities using ICTs to promote constructions of citizenship that are meaningful to women themselves? What alternatives can be proposed in terms of a non-compromised space that can allow for alternative representations of self and citizenship taking into consideration the lack of safety of actual public spheres? This is especially significant in contemporary settings where multiple publics co-exist and the very existence of a bewildering array of diversity threatens to fragment audiences, as it did in the context of Swat.

Conclusion

In order to act in their own interests, women need to develop new subjectivities. However, unless this new subjectivity is framed within the citizenship paradigm, it could bolster activism and even facilitate a change in the dynamics of women's everyday relationships, but without necessarily expanding their active participation as citizens or reconfiguring gender justice.

As ICTs transform technologies of mobilisation and organising by reducing dependence on centralised systems, we need to recognise that they can bring in a transformation only when accompanied by some 'old fashioned' consciousness raising. In Pakistan, ICTs have undoubtedly created pockets in the public sphere in which gender rules for private-public segregation do not apply as before, thus opening up opportunities to promote discourses for which physical spaces are deemed too risky, on issues ranging from a secular vision of Pakistan to those of sexuality and sexual orientation. However, there is little evidence of the ability of ICTs to address the meso-level power dynamics that regulate women's lives. The most crucial aspect in tapping the potential of ICTs to address women's citizenship concerns therefore is in recognising the relationship between the virtual world of ICTs and the tangible world, with its grounded realities of everyday life where the struggle for, and shifts in, power take place.

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CITIGEN Asia Research Programme 2010 - 2012

Coordinated by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India (www.ITforChange.net)

Carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada (http://publicwebsite.idrc.ca/EN/)

The think piece summaries is an outcome of a collaboration under the CITIGEN Asia Research Programme between IT for Change and each of the think piece authors.

Please find the full versions of the think pieces at
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More information and a digital version of the think piece summaries is available at
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Advisors: Lisa McLaughlin, Parminder Jeet Singh and Srilatha Batliwala

Design: Krupa Thimmaiah and Srinidhi Raghavan

Printed by: National Printing Press, Bengaluru

IT for Change

IDRC CRDI