

Feminist Spaces in the IS: Emerging Insights from the Kerala Project

Empowering Women Leaders at the
Local Level:

Translating Descriptive Representation
to Substantive Representation through
ICTs

The Context

The feminist appropriation of ICT is set *against* the dominant neo-liberal paradigm on ICT diffusion to the developing world (ICT4D).

Which is characterised by the increasingly market mediated, “corporate” delivery model of ICT’s and the development of internationally accepted standards (ISO) for the same.

It is also set against the backdrop of information inequality narrowly defined as the opportunity to access and use a computer and a connection to the Internet (“material access”).

Addressing the “Usage Gap”

A meaningful engagement with ICT not merely as a tool for the enhancement of skills and capabilities but one that can create feminist spaces for resistance from existing structures of domination, it is important to take into account the *differential usage* of the computer and move beyond the mere diffusion, deployment or adoption of ICT.

It is for this reason that the technical design of the Platform (www.gramamukhya.in) is envisaged in the context of the ascertainment and fulfilment of a community’s needs, through the creative appropriation of **technology-in-use**.

Design for Feminist Appropriation

Equally vital to using ICT's as tools of gender empowerment is the development of 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.

It is towards this goal of participatory democracy and civic engagement that the Project **Empowering Women Leaders at the Local Level: Translating Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation through ICTs** suggests the introduction of community representation and participation at the level of the very *design* of ICT.

Politics in Design *and Use* of Technology

Lessons from the history of personal computers have shown us that technology has both unintended consequences and possibilities - sometimes conforming to the intentions of its designers and stakeholders and sometimes contradicting them thereby making invisible the social vision and contextual idiom that originally informed its technical features (Pfaffenberger 1988 a & b, Latour 1988).

It is in the interest of reinstating intentionality into the innovation of open ICT's into de-historicized, and often sterile, technical platforms, that our Project seeks to view community media from within the participatory design of ICT perspective.

Iterative Design Methodology

It is crucial therefore to examine the actual procedure for the development and design of digital media that will serve to support community interaction and enable meaningful sociability.

As in advances in the development of software, iterative methodologies involving numerous loops of feedback from multiple stakeholders are critical to the building of ICT mediated communities.

Negotiations, transparency and constructive discourse between the various actors and agents are central to the design process as is its flexibility in the face of limitations and challenges in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

It is with this co-developmental design methodology that we propose to build the Gramamukhya platform and to promote its feminist appropriation as a tool for transformation among women Panchayat leaders in Kerala.

Design beyond ICT4D

Not only do we see it as a design-in-progress, in continuous development with its users, but one that takes a more dynamic approach to the feminist appropriation and indeed *co-creation* of ICT.

It is an approach that privileges what women say and in what context they are saying it over what women 'need'.

The PD approach...

Drawing from the literature on participatory design of ICT, 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.

This has therefore been the underlying principle behind Gramamukhya's the design of the digital platform for women Panchayat leaders in Kerala.