

Research Validation Meeting
2 October 2014
Bangalore, India

IT for Change



Background

The Women-gov action-research project, launched in 2012, aimed at exploring the potential of digital technologies for enhancing women's informational, associational and communicative power to enable them to assert their claims on local governance structures, across three sites in the global South: Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Mysore (India) and Cape Town (South Africa).

IT for Change provided the conceptual leadership to this project and also steered the India component of the project. Instituto Nupef led the project in Brazil and the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. The project has been supported by the Governance, Security, Justice programme of the International Development Research Centre, Canada (IDRC).

On 02 October 2014, a research validation meeting of the project was convened by IT for Change in Bangalore, India, to look back and reflect upon the site-specific action-research experiences, and discern common elements from the highly contextualised narratives. It was felt that such an exercise was essential to build a plan for synthesising the research findings in a meaningful manner so that the core research question – viz, *“what are the conditions under which digital technologies can enable marginalised women gain active citizenship at the local level?”* – could be effectively addressed.



Anita Gurumurthy at the introductory session

Introductory session

Anita Gurumurthy, Executive Director, IT for Change, Bangalore, and Principal Researcher, Women-gov, set the stage for the meeting by outlining the history of the collaborative research project. The seeds of the Women-gov project idea came out of a previous research collaboration between the three lead researchers – Anita Gurumurthy from IT for Change, Graciela Selaimen from Instituto Nupef, and Desiree Lewis from the University of the Western Cape – under the CITIGEN-Asia programme of IT for Change (2010-12).

The explorations commenced during the CITIGEN-Asia programme (<http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/>), which had focused on developing a Southern feminist analytical framework around women's experiences of citizenship in the network society context, were carried forward under the Women-gov project.

The Women-Gov project has been funded by the Governance, Security and Justice (GSJ) programme of IDRC. The meta question that this programme has tried to address, is: *“Under what conditions will greater citizen engagement lead to enhanced state responsiveness and accountability?”*

The focus of the GSJ programme has been on 'failed' states. However, under the Women-gov project, we have tried to address the concerns for security and justice even in those contexts that are considered as 'functional democracies'. The project has tried to alert that even in ostensibly vibrant democracies with formal provisions for decentralisation of powers to local government, there are important gaps in human security, and social and gender justice, that need to be addressed. What the partnering organisations in this project ask, and have tried to answer, is the question of *“What can ICTs do to redeem the unjust and insecure lives that most people lead?”*

In several countries in the global South, the fragility of the (democratic) state and lack of accountability to marginalised citizens, is an everyday reality. Anita went on to explain the approach that the project towards digital technologies, viz. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are more than tools; they are co-constitutive elements of the social world.

She also introduced the hypothesis of the project: *“the guided use of digital technologies enables marginalised women to gain active citizenship at the local level, democratising formal and informal institutions and systems, particularly in the system of local governance”*.

The empowering ecologies in this context are informational, communicative and associational.

'Guided use' can create a new culture of information that challenges existing information hierarchies, and enable women to forge translocal and local solidarities. She concluded her introduction by reminding the audience that the project-specific narratives would go into the specifics of how 'guided use' has been interpreted in each context.

Session 1: Young women, digital activism and the public sphere – the South Africa research experience

Following Anita's introduction, Desiree Lewis from the University of the Western Cape presented the South Africa component of the Women-Gov project. Before delving into the details of the project, Desiree provided an account of the socio-cultural and political context of South Africa. As part of the democratising process, South Africa took up governance and participation-related reforms, and telecommunications reform. However, even today, most young people – especially young women – find local government alienating. Also, the majority of the population does not have access to ICTs- including young women in urban and peri-urban areas (the community that

the project focuses on). In fact, until very recently, there was no national framework for ICTs.



Desiree Lewis (second from left) presenting the research experience from the South Africa site

It is in this context that the project has attempted to bring together young women from the marginalised peri-urban neighbourhoods of Cape Town, and women students of the University of the Western Cape – to enable the development of a shared political agenda among these 2 groups of women. In fact, the project has focused on conscientising young women and helping them embrace political citizenship.

Speaking about the challenges faced, Desiree explored how it was, and continues to be, difficult to find a middle path between formal equality and radical feminist notions. Also, the need to be empowered as an individual, and to create a collective, and the dichotomy between these two was something that came to the fore during the project. Another such dichotomy that was experienced pertained to the 'invited' versus 'invented' spaces of citizenship – spaces that participants claimed through their political action, and the spaces granted by the state.

Desiree went on to describe the findings of the action-research project. She stressed how the 'invented' spaces of citizenship created by the ICT strategies of the project – the new media forms and media landscapes – have built young women's informational power. She also emphasized on how the way people imagine and create spaces for dialogue, is often left out in our discussion of what is the 'political'. Finally,

in terms of collective action, Desiree pointed out how often our notions of collective action can be narrow and two-dimensional. She offered the question of “How can we measure how powerful dance as a form of (political) expression is?”, as an example of the limitations of our current frameworks for theorising collective action.

Following Desiree's presentation, Kathleen Diga from the University of KwaZulu-Natal responded. She pointed to the fact that the research has reinterpreted the local: by bringing the lens of power to emerging patterns that we as researchers, may not be aware of, when we begin our research. Drawing upon Desiree's presentation, Kathleen also highlighted that creativity and activism, feminism and civic action have intermingled, in the strategies of this project.

Speaking specifically with reference to the draft report submitted by the South African team, Kathleen stated that it is a good summary of South African history, women's agency within government processes, ICT literature and feminist theory. She also observed how in terms of youth involvement in citizen struggles, South Africa has an illustrious history. South Africa has the largest number of recorded protests; therefore, the history of restlessness provides a context for the possibilities of our engagement.

feedback on the South African project and drew our attention to certain larger issues in the discussion. As a feminist activist who is invested in the questions of gendered identity and sexuality, Nadine highlighted a gap in the current debate. For instance, in the Arab World, women's rights and their participation in politics has become mainstream and popular. However, in this conversation, we often forget the role of the economy. It is important for feminists to not just focus on violence and sexuality, in their political analysis, but also on capital and its workings. Finally, she inquired about the future of the group of young women that the project has engaged with.

Alison Gillwald, the chair of this session and Executive Director of Research ICT Africa, added to the discussion by stating that, from a research perspective, it is essential to background the insights of this project against existing quantitative analyses of patterns of access and use of ICTs, as well as alienation of the marginalised in the current context. From her experience at Research ICT Africa, Alison mentioned how Western Cape is an interesting case to study through such a methodology, because women have greater/equal access to use of mobile phones. Also, Western Cape has a larger number of women who are leaders and are politically active. They are also more likely to be employed when compared to the men. Thus, the discussion needs to move beyond access and engage with how ICTs are being used. Alison also reiterated that gender based violence in various dimensions has been addressed by the project, and it clearly recognises that violence against women is as common within the home as within the workplace. Therefore, in this context, we need to shed light on the contradictions and complexities of gender relations in various domains.



Kathleen Diga (second from left) responding to Desiree Lewis' presentation

Nadine Moawad from the Association for Progressive Communications also gave



Alison Gillwald, first from left, chairing the session on the South Africa research experience

Srilatha Batliwala from the Association for Women's Rights in Development reiterated the significance of re-examining women's role in violence and breaking away from the conventional approach. She stated that there is a need to interrogate women's role in perpetuating violence, rather than view them as passive victims. She went on to reveal that there is an increasing polarisation along ethnic lines which targets young people (including young women). Thus, the relationship between women and violence is complicated.

Tigist Hussien, also from the University of the Western Cape and part of the South Africa research team, responded to the comments shared by the participants. She shared her experiences in the project and stated the difficulties the South Africa team has faced, in involving the local municipality in the project. Officials are invited to all meetings and programmes but they usually do not come. Another challenge faced by the project is trying to negotiate between online and offline spaces in their everyday struggles.

Bringing the discussion back to methodology, Desiree explained that they took their cue from the quantitative study they conducted at the start of the project, to explore whether young women from the community were engaging with local government processes. This was followed up with focus group discussions and interviews. They found that the women feel a sense of alienation from government, and so

there was also a discomfort with the information and an unwillingness to engage. She also clarified that the project does not aim at determining women's agency. It is crucial for women to decide where they take their political agency, to. The project's attempt on the other hand, has been about encouraging the participating women to criticise, think holistically and analytically.

Alison Gillwald concluded the discussion by stating that practitioners' role should be to make people aware about the potential of ICTs to transform governance and democracy.

Session 2: Inclusive democracy in the age of network governance- the India research experience

Nandini Chami from IT for Change [presented](#) the insights from the India component of the Women-Gov project. She began the presentation by discussing the project site and the rationale guiding the choice of the project area. IT for Change works in 2 blocks (sub-district regions) in Mysore district in the state of Karnataka, India. The 2 blocks of H.D.Kote and Hunsur were chosen because they had been ranked as the most backward areas in the state in the early 2000s. The ranking was done by measuring the Human Development Indices, infrastructure indicators and the percentage of dalit and tribal groups (most marginalised groups) in the population.

The voice, visibility and centrality of dalit women's collectives in local governance processes are usually excluded and therefore, the project's goal has been to bring this to the forefront.



Nandini Chami presenting the India research experience

Nandini then delved into the history of decentralisation in India. She explained that under colonial rule, the *panchayat* (local government unit) had become an extremely patriarchal, casteist space. Thus, the constitution makers were against the devolution of power to the *panchayats*. But then, debates around decentralisation emerged and India amended the constitution to give local rural and urban government bodies, constitutional status, along with affirmative action (through quotas) for women and marginalised communities.

In reality, however, fiscal power still lies with the state. The quotas are also misused and women are placed in the *panchayat* as proxies and do not necessarily address women's issues. There has also been a decentralisation of corruption networks. As one of the women the project works with stated- "Earlier we had to feed one tiger, now we have to feed a pack of rats and we don't even know how big the pack is."

It is essential to note that digital technologies can also be misused. For example, village level meetings are to be documented online. In the geographies that IT for Change works, a perusal of online records reveal that every meeting had been held. In reality, however, a fake circular was circulated only among those the village leaders wanted to attend the meeting and it was held without advance notice to the larger public. Some of the strategies of the project in India have been: building a critical mass of women-run information centres for public information

outreach and enhancing women's linkages to local institutions (such as public health centre, village school, elected local government etc.); community radio and video for citizenship education, IVR for trans-local networking of women's collectives, and GIS-enabled participatory mapping.

The project has also linked elected women with women's collectives. This is to create an alternative space for women who are usually not allowed to occupy these public spaces. The information centre is central to our strategy. It has become an arbitrator of public interest. This raises questions of how do we create an institution? What norms do we build? How do we address factors like caste? The team is still grappling with these concerns. Even within collectives, there are issues among the members and negotiating this can be difficult. For example, when it comes to the elected women and women's collectives the project works with, it is difficult to set norms like why they should not take money for sharing this information or creating a commercial model.

Finally, in India, especially in rural India, creating access is the first step – in such initiatives. Following this, we need to explore how that technology is being used. Therefore, there is an urgent need to re-imagine public access infrastructure. The chair Eduardo Villanueva, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Peru, then threw the floor open for comments and discussion.

Dorothea Kleine from Royal Holloway, University of London, shared her views on the Indian project. She appreciated the fact that the project addresses systemic problems and is not issue based. She also recognised that the project is unabashedly political. From the ICTD perspective, the research is fairly advanced as gender hasn't fully made its way into this field of inquiry. Thus, projects like this exemplify what can be done if we bring ICTD and gender perspectives together.

Dorothea also acknowledged the significance of

the infomediaries as meaningful. The use of multiple media is also “future-proofing” the efforts of IT for Change. She also applauded the use of GIS technology as it is under-utilised in these spaces.

In terms of feedback for the synthesis, Dorothea mentioned the significance of psychological, social, cultural resources and the need to build this. Politically, it also important to work with young men, and think about masculinity. Methodologically, when we count women for impact, it is crucial to question *what* we are counting and its relevance.

Alison added to Dorothea's responses by emphasising that theory and practice should not be seen as a binary, but rather as a continuum. Methodologically, one should move away from just the descriptive look at causality. Reiterating her earlier statement, Alison established that empowerment is not about giving women a mobile phone, but rather, about challenging existing hierarchies. There is an inherent disadvantage in being rural because of access. However, the sense of community is easier to forge. In urban settings, access to technology may be easy, but a sense of community is less likely to be strong unless created (mostly because of migrant labour etc.). These contextual realities are important to recognise.

Picking up from Alison and Dorothea's concerns regarding methodology, Anita explained that qualitative and ethnographic study was central to the action-research project. Having recognised this, it was also important for the team to collect and study quantitative data. The women that the project works with have been involved with IT for Change for several years. Thus, it was felt that they would be compelled out of loyalty to share only positive feedback through the qualitative methods. This was why the use of quantitative methodology became crucial, if only to provide some additional insight to the findings from the qualitative methods – and she shared a weighted index measure that had been developed by the

project, to assess women's informational, associational and communicative power – the 'active citizenship index'.



Dorothea Kleine (second from right) sharing her feedback on Nandini Chami's presentation

Session 3: Directions for the synthesis

Presenting the synthesis, Anita brought forth the question of “*In the era of ICTs, how do we build contextual models in participatory governance?*” The women that the project engages with, understand local governance, but are unable to fully grasp the nuances of this abstract notion of citizenship that we, as researchers and social scientists, talk about. Thus, there is a need to “*make citizenship familiar*”. The introduction of ICTs in governance systems has revealed how it can be incorporated in very different ways, based on socio-cultural contextual factors.

Does more information automatically mean more democracy or do patriarchal structures prevent women from being able to make meaningful use of it?

We would like to highlight here the need to not view information centres as merely public access points, but rather as institutions without which there would be no digital access in the rural areas.

The next question to ask is: “*How does guided use transform relationships with local structures?*”

Women can critically engage in governance if

data is already in the public domain and they have access to it and can make sense of the data. Thus, addressing these multiple steps from access to critical engagement is central to participatory governance.

What the project has revealed is that, at the minimum, participating women have become, or are becoming, familiar with democracy. There are several other questions that need to be answered: *Do the women speak differently? Are women also furthering the entrenched inequalities of class and caste structures?* Unfortunately, there is no way to answer this question legitimately and with full authority.

Anita then went on to answer the meta-question of *“What did the project do for gender based solidarity?”* She said that there are new liminal (in-between) spaces for women's civic-public engagement and their political voice.

The next question she addressed was: *“Are women able to develop trans-local communities?”* In South Africa and Brazil this has taken place. The women come to the project site from their different communities and occupy this space. In India, this has not taken place to such an extent because of deep-rooted cultural and social barriers. However, there is potential. Other questions that she highlighted, include: *How do we politicise local democracy? What emerging cultural practices can create a flourishing civic-public? How far can community media go?*

One aspect that has not been explicitly discussed in this project but needs attention is Internet governance, and more specifically, network neutrality. Anita also pointed how the nature of the Internet is changing, and with it, women's relationship with it. The blurring of states and markets has also complicated this dichotomy.

In conclusion, Anita called attention to the need to frame governance, security and justice in the context of techno-social realities. *“If people are*

abstracted and just become points of data, we will never get justice.”

The discussion following Anita's presentation was chaired by Srilatha.

Parminder Jeet Singh from IT for Change implored the project partners to frame talking points for policy makers, based on their findings. Referring to Anita's earlier statement, Parminder reiterated how information centres are fast becoming like public goods, which makes it all the more critical to engage with policy makers.

Sumandro Chattapadhyay from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies inquired about whether the assumptions made at the start of the project were challenged at the end. The session ended with Anita responding to Sumandro's query. She stated that the hypothesis was quite accurate, primarily because IT for Change has been working in this space for a few years and the assumptions are more intuitive now. She also cautioned about how this type of research is often exoticised. Therefore, it becomes important to view this research as a placeholder for how a majority of the world would relate to technology.

Overall reflections: future directions for research, policy and programming



Roberto Bissio chairing the final discussion on future directions for research, policy and programming.

Roberto Bissio from the Third World Institute chaired the final session of the workshop, which examined future pathways for research, policy

and programming. In his opening remarks, he expressed the importance of looking at research as a continuum. He said that the dilemma between specific contextual circumstances and the global aspects of the project should also be a focus of any research endeavour. In other words, what is the lens through which we analyse a specific example, what can be taken away from it, what can be learned, and what is irrelevant to other contexts? This must be sorted out in every research project.

Srilatha added to the discussion by urging the project partners to explore further, and mine deeper, how the notion of deepening democracy has been constrained in the governance discourse. She also asked us to question the role of techno-social processes in deepening democracy in other relationships that women are engaged in, even those in the “private” space?

She also observed that: *“Data can be mined more to comment on the democratic reverberations outside the conventional governance settings.”*

She also warned of the possibility of the 'communicative' aspect being under-examined. The other two aspects (informational and associational) are compelling and strongly represented in the research, also because they directly relate to the conversations on local governance, and there is a danger of not paying adequate attention to the 'political voice' dimension. Finally, going back to the constituency of the action-research, *“how do participants in the project look at governance?”*

Michael Gurstein, from the Centre for Community Informatics Research, Development and Training, Canada, followed up on Srilatha's remarks by observing that the discussion was not about theories of change but rather strategies of change. He echoed Roberto and Alison on the necessity of using ICTs in exploratory ways. *“What lessons can we learn from the grassroots context and can they be recreated in urban/peri-urban areas?”* Or to phrase it differently, within the different sites of the project, what is

generalisable? To answer this question, the strategies need to be thought through. A larger question of *“How does what we do fit into political processes?”* should also be raised – he noted.

Sonia Randhawa from the Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia, raised the question of: *“How do we try and embed the experiences that we see encapsulated here, in the language that policymakers dealing with technology policy are accustomed to?”* She observed that the Women-gov project had revealed the importance of public access infrastructure and community media for women's political empowerment, and that translating these concerns into regulatory frameworks for ICT Infrastructure provisioning, especially while framing broadband plans, was the next step forward.

On this note reaffirming the relevance and criticality of the insights from the site-specific narratives of Women-gov, the meeting came to a close.

PARTICIPANTS:

1. Andrea Ordonez, Independent Researcher, Ecuador
2. Alison Gillwald, Research ICT Africa, South Africa
3. Desiree Lewis, University of the Western Cape, South Cape
4. Dorothea Kleine, Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom
5. Eduardo Villanueva, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Peru
6. Kathleen Diga, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
7. Michael Gurstein, Centre for Community Informatics Research, Development and Training, Canada
8. Nadine Moawad, Association for Progressive Communications, Lebanon

9. Phet Sayo, IDRC, Canada
10. Roberto Bissio, Third World Institute, Uruguay
11. Sonia Randhawa, Centre for Independent Journalism, Malaysia
12. Srilatha Batliwala, India-based scholar associate, Association for Women's Rights in Development.
13. Sumandro Chattapadhyay, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, India.
14. Tigist Hussen, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

IT for Change team

1. Anita Gurumurthy
2. Anupama Suresh
3. Gurumurthy Kasinathan
4. Mangamma
5. Nandini Chami
6. Parminder Jeet Singh
7. Roshini Suparna Diwakar
8. Suvarna