Women-gov

A South-South project on making local governance work for women

Supported by the International Development Research Centre, Canada (2012-2014)

Project Overview

December 2013

(Interim evaluation of intervention strategies and their impact in Brazil, India and South Africa)

Interim Project Overview

Making Local Governance Work for Women: Exploring New Institutional Possibilities

Women-gov

(A multi-country action-research project (2012-2014) located in Brazil, India and South Africa,
coordinated by IT for Change
and supported by the Governance, Security and Justice Programme 2011-2016, IDRC)

1. Introduction

On many counts, a reading of post-colonial democracies in the Global South suggests that the project of modernity is still incomplete. In these contexts, as scholars have often observed, the experience of citizenship emerges as everyday life struggles, where communities located differentially in the socio-structural hierarchy become political subjects through actions engaging, and sometimes contesting, the state. Citizenship is also a moving target, especially for those situated in the margins – circumscribed as such communities and individuals may be, by the agenda-setting power and mediating role of informal institutions and elite-led movements. Disenfranchisement is indeed an experience marked by gender. Socially and economically marginalised women in specific contexts of the Global South find themselves at the peripheries of local governance and democracy.

As new technologies spur new visions of nation-building, there is a flux within which aspirations of the marginalised can find concrete expression. The introduction of digital technologies in local governance presents a disruptive moment for marginalised women to make claims and influence the efficacy of public service delivery that is crucial for their well being. Technological affordances can also confer new 'civic intelligence' to negotiate questions of equity and social justice in relation to local governance, enabling the marginalised to challenge the status-quo.

As e-governance structures emerge and as digital technologies transform the grammar of politics and governance, a new regime of state-citizen relationships is being forged. Research that generates contextual evidence on what therefore is changing for marginalised women in relation to their claims over local governance and public institutions, and if and how they may be able to gain voice and exercise agency, is critical. Such research would also allow gender as a category to explicate exclusion and power in policy decisions to deepen democracy.

The main hypothesis guiding the *Women-gov* project is that **the empowering ecologies constituted by digital technologies can enable marginalised women to enhance their active citizenship at the local**

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level, democratising formal and informal institutions and systems, particularly in the sphere of local governance. The research uses an action research methodology, working with socially and economically marginalised women in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Mysore (India), and Cape Town (South Africa).

Using women's gendered experiences of alienation from the state, and marginalisation from public service delivery, the project seeks to explore the creation of an ICT-enabled ecology as a pathway for designing new possibilities for gender-related transformation in local governance structures, processes and institutions. Presently, in these contexts, addressing governance failure and bringing effective service delivery is an important concern of the mainstream governance paradigm – and in this discourse, ICTs are given pride of place as 'one-stop solutions' that enable better targeting and service delivery through the new data architectures and public administration systems that they make possible. However, access to new technologies on the 'demand side' is a market-led phenomenon, divorced from women's citizenship experiences.

Focussing on the systematic pursuit of knowledge around the relationship between technological affordances, exclusion and citizenship, *Women-gov* explores the promise of emergent techno-social spaces for reclaiming women's 'active citizenship' as a political idea. It seeks to learn from building and strengthening marginalised women's on-going struggle for substantive equality in relation to formal structures and spaces within the state sphere, the 'local' public sphere and the knowledge / academic sphere.

Women's "active citizenship" has been conceptualised as consisting of the following elements:

1. Informational power: Women's capacity to access information channels in the sphere of formal and informal politics.

2. Associational power: The extent to which membership in a collective enables women to negotiate, bargain and/or successfully claim their entitlements,access to resources, and rights in the sphere of formal and informal politics.

3. Communicative power: The extent to which women are able to challenge discursive hegemonies arising out of the operations of patriarchy, in the local public sphere.

The intervention strategies across the three sites thus aim at utilising and closely studying the emancipatory possibilities of digital technologies for enhancing women's informational, associational and communicative power.

2. Methodology and site-specific strategies

The project adopts an action-research methodology for building theoretical insight on techno-social

ecologies and women's active citizenship. The research process focuses on a spiral of steps – each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action. It uses an interpretive approach that places meaning-making by the women whose standpoint guides the the research[1]. Systematic documentation using qualitative ethnographic methods, is being undertaken in all the sites of the research. Quantitative data has been used to supplement evidence generated. In order to build a conceptual framework that can create a coherent narrative across the 3 sites, network society theory, gender and development literature and feminist political theory are being used to analyse emerging findings.

Brazil Intervention: A key area of focus has been strengthening of the voices of Afro-Brazilian women community leaders or *Ìyàlòódes'* located in São João de Meriti (in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro) in local governance processes, overcoming the historical conditions of invisibility and vulnerability that have disadvantaged this social group.

India Intervention: In India, the project works with socially marginalised women's 'collectives' (locally known as *sanghas*) in Mysore district of Karnataka state, using community media for citizenship education and women-run digitally enabled information centres for enabling effective entitlements-seeking.

South Africa Intervention: In South Africa, the project has drawn together students from a historically black University, the University of the Western Cape, and young women associated with three NGOs in Cape Town. The research aims at galvanising the collective strengths of these differently located young women (students as well as women associated with NGOs), by providing training, resources, and political guidance that will facilitate their public participation and community involvement around the following key areas: violence against women; integrated transport services; and public employment programmes.

3. A brief glance at some emerging insights:

The research is in its final phase, and the parameters for an end-line are being discussed. The teams are also due to meet in February 2014, towards this. Some tentative findings, to be discussed further, are listed below.

(a) A decentralised information architecture can enable marginalised women to build their collective capability for claims-making and democratic dialogue, provided its design privileges their ownership. Such an information architecture can effectively harness the new information channels opened up by ICTs and the Internet, enable women to overcome barriers on account of local gatekeeping of information and generate their own data (small people shaping big data!)

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1   Drawing inspiration from the epistemological foundations of action-research and feminist research methodology.

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(b) The promise of political empowerment online is not a mere function of 'access'. In particular, marginalised women's associational power, in digitally mediated ecologies, needs structures and processes that seamlessly weave in online and offline actions, for solidarity and community.

(c) Women's communicative power in the information society context needs connectivity infrastructure and ICT artifacts. It also presupposes the construction and signification of digital space as public-political and deliberative.

(d) The limits of the emancipatory possibilities of the Internet and new ICTs are determined by the macro-structures of technology and its governance. To be effective, communities and practitioners must straddle the twin imperatives of shaping techno-architectures with developing innovative, situated ICT strategies for harnessing the empowering possibilities of technologies.

(e) Centrally driven techno-managerialism in e-governance programmes has meant very little for marginalised communities. Emerging e-governance paradigms require critical re-thinking for addressing policies on social inclusion – including on public investments for creating not only affordable and high quality connectivity infrastructure, but also digitally enabled civic intelligence, that makes connectivity a meaningful experience.

4. Impacts

Policy Advocacy
(a) IT for Change has taken forward the insights emerging from the project on creating socially just e-governance paradigms, in global policy advocacy spaces where the post-2015 development agenda is being shaped, such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Consultation with Special Procedures Mandate Holders organised by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in October 2013. In its interventions, IT for Change has been critiquing certain assumptions in the 'Big Data for Development' rhetoric. We have produced evidence to show how the quality of citizenship depends on possibilities for bottom-up, situated data architectures that enable micro-planning and action by local communities.

(b) Instituto Nupef in Brazil, has been focusing on the question of shaping techno-architectures in a manner that results in more equitable outcomes for marginalised groups. They are actively involved in the national debates and parliamentary deliberations around a proposed Law guaranteeing Civil Rights in the use of the Internet (*Marco Civil da Internet*). Nupef is also educating local communities on the importance of the *Marco-Civil* debates to their everyday lives.

Shaping the mainstream discourse on governance and justice

(a) Instituto Nupef has been focusing on enabling the Afro-Brazilian women community leaders whom it works with on utilising the Internet and ICTs, for interpreting public data and using this to dialogue

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with local government officials.

(b) IT for Change has been closely engaged with the Department of Information Technology, the Department of Rural Development and *Panchayat* Raj, and the National Mission for the Empowerment of Women, to re-shape e-governance as an agenda for deepening democracy.

(c) The University of the Western Cape is bringing in an entire community that has been totally alienated from the mainstream governance and political scene in Capetown – young, black women from marginalised communities who have not had an opportunity to develop a political voice. Through the *Women-gov* project, these young women have been a part of citizenship education processes that enable them to problematise issues such as public transport, violence, and the rising incidence of unemployment among youth, as critical to women's experiences of, and participation in, urban spaces.

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