

**Draft Qualitative Report for the Young women Govern South Africa  
Project within the Women-Gov Project**

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*Work-in-progress*



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## 1. Policy Brief

### Executive Summary

Marginalized young South African women are extremely disadvantaged because of their social locations. At the same time they are potentially powerful in terms of their numbers and capacity for public engagement and leadership. The Young Women-Govern South Africa Project sought to strengthen young women's public participation in the Western Cape through using ICTs including social media, IT skills, the making and circulation of documentaries and photographs and public events and campaigns. In realizing its mandate to empower citizens who have been disempowered on the basis of age, race, gender and class, post-apartheid local, provincial and national government planning should support, assist and strengthen the core trajectories of this project at the regional, communal and national levels.

### Introduction: The South African Intervention: Challenges of Action Research

Within the parameters of a three-country project addressing women and public participation titled "Women Govern", the South African action research intervention has focused on young women in the 18-29 year-old age range. Socially marginalized young women form a group that is possibly more alienated from and ignorant of public information than other groups defined as major constituencies<sup>1</sup>. Having grown up as the inheritors of post-apartheid change, few have been involved in NGOs, CBOs or trade unions in the ways that a previous generation was. At the same time, their youth, sense of restlessness, and the fact that they are far more familiar with modern ICTs than a previous generation all mean that they form keen and strategically located participants in a civic action project that enlists the adventurous use of new media.

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<sup>1</sup> These would be "youth", black men, black people, women, black women, rural women, rural people.

The action research between 2012 and 2014 has addressed women's active citizenship. Information produced by NGOs, CBOs and local, provincial or national government, can alienate and further marginalize young women as critically informed citizens. The Project has concentrated on young women establishing control over the production and dissemination of information, rather than on their access to existing circuits of information.

In an attempt to target marginalized women in urban and peri-urban Cape Town, the first phase of the Project involved working with the young women's chapter of a community-based organization, the New Women's Movement. Following lessons learned from this partnership, the second phase of the Project, which commenced from the start of 2013, involved working with women students in partnership with young women from NGOs and in marginalized areas in the Western Cape.

### **Approaches and Results**

The Project has focused on five related priorities and goals. These are:

to enhance young women's associational activity;

to institute and strengthen information-sharing;

to facilitate the use of ICT access and competencies in developing associational activity and information production and sharing;

to develop young women's understanding of domestic, community and national politics, especially around gender and sexuality;

to encourage young women to use new media for their active engagement around domestic, community and national affairs.

Work done during the first and second phases of the Project revealed the importance of young women developing their autonomous creative, intellectual and political voices. Action research on Young women Govern-South Africa has also uncovered the significance of women's creative and dialogic expression in facilitating their grounded understanding of local and national politics and their critical information sharing and knowledge production. Genres such as dance, film-making, poetry, photography, artwork and installations have therefore been central to the campaigns and public events conducted in 2013 and the start of 2014.

The interaction between students and young women in communities presented both positive and challenging results. Because of the structural and long-term effects of apartheid, many young women who are not students were practically unable to maintain their commitment to project activities, workshops and skills acquisition. Students have therefore been the most consistent participants, and the goal of deepening communication has not always been achieved. In this regard, the location of the Project in the Women's and Gender Studies Department alongside its collaboration with the Gender Equity Unit, is contributing to the University's long history of social engagement. At the same time, the difficulties of this engagement in post-apartheid neo-liberal South Africa cannot be denied. However, the principle of working towards each-one-teach one was consistently followed in the project, even though it was realized that working with organizations, as opposed to individuals who may or may not be connected to NGOs or CBOs presented many organizational and administrative challenges that undermined rather than strengthened the project's goals.

One major objective of this Project was to strengthen networks with local government structures and systems. The 16 months of the second phase of the Project did not allow for consolidated exchanges, even though young women were able to enhance their public participation and communal visibility. Research on the reasons for this has ascertained that a major factor is the length and depth of the Project. Unemployed young women and young women who do not have the resources to pursue higher Education are under pressure in households to perform domestic activities and to be income generators. Incentives for participation in public participation can only be developed over time. A second factor is the exclusionary nature of participatory structures and discourses from the points of view of young women. The language, protocols and conventions of public participation through local government structures and processes do little to engage socially marginalized women as embodied persons, rather than as abstract social subjects with entitlements to rights.

## Conclusion

The feminist action research project aimed at enhancing young women's public participation encourages reflection on the role and significance of popular education at South African universities in the present day. With the closure of projects and sites at several South African universities, universities appear to have declared the demise of popular education with the aim of concentrating on "academic excellence". At the same time, marginalized subjects continue to be primary subjects in university-based research. This action-research project has sought to incorporate young women as active producers of knowledge, and to ensure that their voices are heard. Most importantly, it has demonstrated the significance of opening up debate, especially in the wake of the 2008 Ministerial Committee Report on the transformation of higher education, on the role of Higher Education and public participation in neo-liberal South Africa.

Sectoral approaches to change create little space for much-needed dialogue between government; policy-makers and planners; the HE sector and feminist and other social justice initiatives. There is an urgent need to create dialogues across sectoral boundaries to set in place sustainable and pro-active support systems and policy research for enhancing the public participation of youth in South Africa.

Think tanks and workshops for taking these ventures forward are important. Equally important are efforts by local and national government to ensure that citizens are not only able to access information, but are equipped to play contributory roles as critically informed and respected citizens. In recent years, the strikes and protests against poor service delivery in South African communities speaks volumes about the discontent among South Africans, and young people in particular, with the trend towards top-down systems of governance. It is also a gauge of the frustrations experienced by citizens who have lost confidence in existing platforms of debate around democratic governance. The information revolution has set in place valuable platforms and technologies for facilitating these exchanges. And young South Africans, despite the digital divide, are well-placed to drive these exchanges.

## Implications and Recommendations

- Inter-sectoral conversations involving local government, donors and the HE sector, are important in setting in place strategies and priorities for guiding projects and sites for ICT-driven public participation programmes. The fragmented approach to sectoral reform that was ushered in from 1994 has proved ineffective, especially regarding the need to integrate the ICT sector and telecommunications reform.
- A national ICT policy framework which is open to input from several stakeholders and which is widely circulated and publicized would strengthen the independent communicative power and scope for public participation of young women.
- The implementation of e-services such as e-government, e-health and e-education must be revised in accordance with the varying resources and different voices of women in poor communities.
- Efforts must be made to develop and strengthen communal participation alongside telecommunications reform. The silos that sectors have operated in to date have proved detrimental to participatory governance and public access to and usage of ICTs.
- Universities must critically assess their role as producers of knowledge deemed to be in the service of the empowerment of socially marginalized groups. As several inquiries into the protracted transformation of the HE sector vis-à-vis public education have revealed, universities and University centres, units and Departments should be galvanizing conversations about much-needed changes.
- In the early years of South African democracy, the emphasis within local government on Integrated Development Planning sought to reverse the divisions and uneven-ness of apartheid planning. The purposes, mechanics and timing of IDP planning should be clearly spelt out for communities on radio, in the print media and digitally to ensure that all interested parties can contribute in holistic and accountable planning for all members of communities.
- Inattention to the revolutionary impact of new media, especially among youth, should be fully integrated into Integrated Development Planning. Planning for communities has tended to assume that members lack all skills, interest or

resources to exploit the revolutionary potential of modern ICTs. However, the energies of South African youth, including those from the most marginalized communities, defy the stereotype of a socially marginalized South African who is wholly cut off from the world of ICTs.

- Using ICTs in fragmented communities in South Africa presents enormous possibilities for deepening young South Africans' engagement with participatory processes. Resources, funding and programmes for ICT-driven ventures are therefore critical. At the same time, these resources should ensure that programmes are geared towards the substantive empowerment of citizens, rather than equipping them to take up compliant roles within the existing class, racial and gendered status quo. While this "empowerment" leads to small sections of communities enjoying short-term privileges within the parameters of developmentalism, it does not allow for strategic and long-term changes that guarantee a flourishing and robust democracy.
- The dourness and austerity of existing information about governance and public or civic participation currently available to South Africans can alienate young people whose needs for engaging in lively and compelling cultural and political affairs is steadily intensifying because of the energy of the contemporary globalized world of mass culture. Much of this mass culture is reactionary, misogynistic and sedating. However, the forms of visual culture and the entertainment industry, which often morph into new media today, are valuable and necessary components of information production and dissemination among young people.
- The accountability of government (including local and national government) to marginalized communities tends to involve communities' being required to use strategies, structures and agendas defined by politicians, bureaucrats and administrators. The principle of ensuring that public participation entails what Devaki Jain has terms "bubbling up", rather than "trickling down", is rapidly being eroded in South Africa, and must be re-activated.



## 2. Context Analysis

### 2.1 Women, Citizenship and Public Participation

In creating a framework for gender equality, the South African constitution has obviously made provision for the active role of women in governance, law-making and public participation. Since the Constitution also institutes measures for redressing apartheid inequalities in order to promote equality, the advancement of black women - who were effectively disenfranchised under apartheid - has been actively promoted through institutions including National Gender Machinery, the Commission on Gender Equality and the Human Rights Commission, as well as the National Gender Policy Framework and several laws and policies within education, politics and the workplace. South Africa has also ratified international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, and has endorsed regional instruments for ensuring gender equality, such as SADC's protocol on gender and development. Several measures for ensuring non-discrimination against and affirmative action for black women have led to the country's being ranked among those with the highest numbers of women in government at the parliamentary and provincial levels. Although women's leadership at the local government level has been far less impressive, safeguards for ensuring women's decision-making and leadership have been instituted through the South African Local Government Act and the legislative emphasis on the role of local government in the Integrated Development Process (IDP).

Although the country has an impressive standing in indices that measure women's participation at the upper levels of government as well as policies and laws for women's empowerment, large numbers of poor, unemployed and working-class women do not contribute to decision-making about the country's laws, policies and development plans at the national or local levels. Moreover, many women in South Africa's rural areas, as well as its mushrooming urban and peri-urban areas continue to bear the brunt of poverty, lack of services, limited access to education and other resources and insecurity in public spaces and their homes. Today, therefore, the position of most South African women in politics is strikingly similar to that of the majority of women in Brazil and India: in each of these

postcolonial and multi-cultural countries, the majority of women face enormous challenges in contributing to governance not only at the national level, but also at the communal levels. This is the case despite the facts that each of these countries has undergone major democratic restructuring. In India, Brazil and South Africa, the struggles of groups that have been marginalized on the basis of race, class, caste, ethnicity and gender have culminated in innovative policies, laws and planning for redistributive and decision-making justice. As revealed in the IBSA Dialogue Forum established in 2003, Brazil, India and South Africa also share a standing in the international community as influential “middle powers” in the third world. Women-Gov, as a South-South co-operative project for strengthening the participation of politically subordinated women has therefore held out the promise of fruitful comparison and exchange.

The over-arching aim of the South African chapter of the three-country project has been to enhance *young* women’s active public participation and involvement in local governance through their use of ICTs. As the project evolved, however, the meanings of “public participation” and active citizenship became increasingly complex. It became clear that understanding the context of young women’s experiences of citizenship through an action research project seeking to strengthen this necessitates a careful engagement with some of the key theoretical and political challenges that feminists have raised about gender, women’s political agencies and citizenship. South Africa’s rapidly changing information and communication landscape makes this contextualization even more complex. The expansion of Universal Access and Services (UAS) has overlapped with post-apartheid efforts to democratize national resources and public services for all citizens since the dismantling of formal apartheid in 1994. Official attention to public access and universal services was already implicit in the post-apartheid governments Telecommunications Act of 1996, although the particular emphasis on democratizing ICTs was built into the Electronic Communications Act of 2005.

To a greater extent than many other African countries, however, South Africa starkly reveals a first-world-third-world divide, with factors such as technology costs, extremely limited competition among service providers resulting in high bandwidth prices, the vastly

uneven distribution of telecommunications resources, limited education and skills for most of the country's inhabitants, and the costs and accessibility of electricity (Molawa, 2009) posing tremendous challenges for the majority of South Africans, including those living in urban and peri-urban areas and often very close to populations whose usage of and access to ICTs is similar to patterns in the first world. Despite the proliferation of formal measures for public information access and services and political participation, therefore, marginalized women continue to struggle for visibility and authority as active citizens alongside and in relation to their battles to access and create critical knowledge and publically influential information networks.

Just over two decades after the first democratic election in South Africa, the notion of "women's citizenship" - both in official and in popularized public discourse - has become a cliché with very similar meanings to the vacuous notion of "*Batho pele*" or "people first"<sup>2</sup>. During the run-up to the first democratic election, women's roles in governance and public participation were the subject of animated and rich debates. In fact, South Africa - in contrast to many other countries - began to grapple with women's public participation during, and not after, decolonization. From its inception, the African National Congress had created a space for women's agency in anti-apartheid mobilization and struggle. While this led to national action including women's mass protest against apartheid pass laws<sup>3</sup>, women's political agency tended to remain tied to male-centred organizations and agendas. By the 1980s, however, women's groups aligned with the United Democratic Front<sup>4</sup> acted concertedly to centralize gender struggles in the broader movement against apartheid. Three years before the dismantling of apartheid, the Women's National Coalition, an amalgam of women's organizations and party wings, organized seminars, lobby groups, advocacy and debates about the centrality of gender justice to democratic post-apartheid

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<sup>2</sup> Introduced shortly after South Africa's first democratic election, the *batho pele* or "people first" initiative aimed at transforming public service delivery, especially at local government level. More recently, as evidenced by the waves of unrest and demonstrations throughout South Africa, and as a result of GEAR economic policies, *batho pele* is often an empty slogan.

<sup>3</sup> In 1956, in the largest protest against one of apartheid's most dehumanizing laws, approximately 20 000 women marched to the Apartheid Government's buildings in Pretoria to protest against black women's carrying passes to permit them into "white" areas of the country.

<sup>4</sup> The United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983 and became the main anti-apartheid organization operating within South Africa.

transformation. The build-up to independence and the work towards a new Constitution therefore centralized gender justice and women's inclusion in governance, and from 1994, successive pieces of legislation addressed women's inclusion through formal rights.

Twenty years of democratic rule, and the gradual implementation of "gender equitable" legislation and policies at levels including workplaces, the primary and HE sectors, the corporate world, the political sector and domestic and interpersonal relationships (through the Domestic Violence Act and Sexual Offences Acts, for example) alleviated some of the glaring formal social, economic and political inequalities of the apartheid period. Yet because these changes have been made in a neo-liberal context, large numbers of historically disadvantaged women remain unaffected by them, and in many cases, ignorant of what their implications are. In her case study of how a group of unemployed black women in a peri-urban area of the Western Cape responded to workshops on realizing women's rights in 2005, Mary Hames concludes that "for the majority of black women even the notion of liberal citizenship is still a pipe dream... 'paper rights' have not been transformed into 'substantive rights'... especially for those who have been subject to the historical disadvantage that is the legacy of apartheid" (2006:1325)

As indicated above, one major critique of South Africa's implementation of rights for women at the domestic, community and national levels revolves around the fact that many women – both in urban and in rural areas - have limited and uneven access to these rights; there are therefore considerable limits to the "empowerment" they facilitate for most South African women. Given the universality of women's experiences that they assume, "having rights", means accessing advantages within a patriarchal, heteronormative and classist system in which there are entrenched and radical differences among women. "Women's inclusion", even for middle-class women, means their acquiring resources and skills to compete in and take up positions of authority in masculinist, classist and (still) heavily racialized contexts. As the literature review later will show, recent South African feminist appraisals of certain women's formal inclusion - alongside the *de facto* exclusion of many more - dominate policy-related and scholarly work on gender and public participation at the local government and national levels.

A related obstacle to women's public participation has been explored by Linzi Manicom (2005). Manicom confronts ways in which women are constructed as gendered subjects, and how gendered public participation - for both women and men - is naturalized within entrenched racial, class and heteronormative structural relations. For commentators like Manicom, therefore, the problem is not that the rights framework does not "go far enough" or "do enough for all women", but that it is socially constructed to naturalise a range of domestic, communal, national and global power relations. Drawing attention to how nations, even those that seem to set in place major democratizing processes, legitimize themselves in the eyes of the country's inhabitants and an 'international community', Sylvia Walbie rhetorically asks whether women's public action in communal or national processes has the same form or intent as that of men. Interventions into citizenship studies such as Walbie's and Manicom's convey that the apparent universality of a national interest is belied by the way that different social subjects understand national and local interests as well as democratic governance. As revealed in the Indian women's narratives in *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), women marginalized through caste, class, domestic relations, nationalism and global capitalism negotiate intricate entanglements of power. As is the case with the intellectual activism of writers such as Nagar, Walby and Manicom, their struggles gesture towards radical interrogations of citizenship, belonging and public participation for women, as well as the contexts in which women subjects are enjoined to take up positions as "active citizens".

As this study shows, understanding many South African women's struggles for political participation requires a feminist lens sensitive to what progressive legislation and extensive telecommunications reform can obscure. Measures of citizenship and ICT reform have often been juridical ones, programmatic rights and entitlements that easily reduce persons to atomized and universalized subjects. Realising citizenship and communications rights within a legal and juridical framework requires homogenized subjects to speak a common language, to use particular routes and tools of communication, and to accept monolithic models of empowerment. The hegemony of these norms can lead to the effective alienation of citizens from the participatory processes. Throughout the two phases of the project's attention to "empowering young women", researchers were made sharply

aware of the distinctiveness of these women's social locations and perceptions. In particular, our qualitative research grappled with the extent to which young South Africa citizens can remain profoundly estranged from dominant understandings of and criteria for realizing citizenship.

At the same time, however, we were made conscious of how neo-liberalism significantly shapes the subjectivities and struggles of those (including the subjects of the present study) who, politically and economically, stand to benefit little from it. In South Africa, neo-liberalism's hegemony and its assimilation by subordinate groups can be traced to the evolution of the government's economic policies. Post-apartheid economic policies and development during the last two decades rapidly shifted away from the nationalistic and socialist aspects set in place by the Freedom Charter and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) towards the aggressively neo-liberal framework established by the Growth Employment and Redistribution plans from 1996. Unlike the RDP, which placed some emphasis on the democratic redistribution under state regulation, the GEAR strategy blatantly privileged economic productivity and insisted that social goals could be achieved through "competitive platform for a powerful expansion... within a "stable environment for confidence" and a "profitable surge in private investment". (GEAR, 1996: 2). In contrast to the externally-imposed structural adjustment in many other African countries, therefore, South Africa has manifested a "homegrown structural adjustment" (Bond, 2001).

Equally importantly, neo-liberalism in South Africa has discursively shaped public and popular culture and citizens' subjectivities in ways that naturalise constructs of, for example, "empowerment", "freedom" "self-determination and "individual success". In tandem with the state, South Africa's educational system, its globalized mass media industry and its ethos of consumer culture have increasingly prioritized personal achievement and growth under capitalism, investing in young socially mobile South Africans as the future galvanizers of an aggressively neo-liberal capitalist development.

Young working-class, unemployed or poor South African women - especially since they have limited experience or knowledge of radical collectivist struggles - have been highly susceptible to the neo-liberal messages that pervade the current South African cultural and mass communications landscape. Consequently, the struggles, subjectivities and consciousness of socially marginalized young women are often uneven and inconsistent, at times registering deep alienation and estrangement from, and at times reflecting profound desire and yearning.

## **2.2. Women, Local government and Public Participation**

Of the three spheres of government in South Africa, national, provincial and local or municipality level has been seen as being potentially the most proactive level for the voices and service delivery needs of poor women. As outlined in Section 52 of the Constitution, local government has the strongest potential to encourage community participation and decision-making. In the early years of South Africa's democracy, many NGOs, activists, radical researchers and women's community organizations, were confident about the with the unique potential that local government provided for building South Africa's participatory democracy through including the most marginalized women in rural areas, peri-urban slums, informal settlements and townships. It was believed that even if national government and the inevitable centralization of power would not work to effect democratic participation, then local government - guided by successive pieces of legislation - would ensure that marginalized voices would be heard. This conviction was evidenced in the work of the NPO, the Gender Advocacy Programme. In addition to its work on securing women's representation in governance structures and its 50/50 campaign, GAP turned increasingly to women and local government, commissioning several action research projects, including the work on a Gender Policy for Groot Drakenstein, a farming area inhabited by women farm workers as the most vulnerable and exploited group of women workers in South Africa.

As commentators like Yvette Abrahams, Jo Beal and Van Donck showed, gender transformation in local governments would be central to formerly rightless groups' participatory and newly dynamic roles in the years immediately after the transition. Because citizens have far more direct access to their local government councilors than they do to provincial and national MPs, local government, as the "tier closest to the people" brings public participation closest to communities. And when communities have a history of being deprived of the right to democratic governance, local government can encourage confidence in institutions and processes with deeply oppressive apartheid legacies.

This trust is especially important in the case of the majority of women in South Africa. Discriminated against on the basis of race, class and gender, many marginalized women in urban, peri-urban and rural areas experience profound "estrangement" (see Mbembe) from provincial and national institutions and processes of governance. Local government offers them opportunities within their communities to speak in their own idioms to and about the people and worlds they know best. In turn, this facilitates their contribution to promoting significant national changes in women's living conditions and access to power, resources and services.

Local governments are based on the same communal networks, relationships and organisations that were pivotal to struggles for democratic decision-making and participation in South Africa. This history makes the participatory potential of local government extremely significant. Since women played a central part in civic organisations in the seventies and eighties, it is obvious that local government structures and processes can offer them the space to continue to build a sustainable democracy.

To a large extent, however, the models for involving women in local government applied in South Africa, like other third-world contexts, have grown out of a developmentalist paradigm. From the start of the United Nations' Decade of Women (1975-1985), a deluge of research, information and publications began to focus on gender in the context of economic development in third world contexts.

The tradition of highlighting women's developmental needs and agendas was driven by the assumption that women need to be incorporated into existing paradigms of development



by increasing their involvement in prevailing relations of production. This reinforced existing patriarchal and class relations, since relations of exploration and patriarchal power could be maintained in women were simply incorporated into relations of production in which both men and international capital remained dominant.

By defining women mainly as adjuncts in the production and nation-building processes, transnational capital and the imperial global world order could continue to maximise profits, while women would be plunged into growing cycles of poverty and disempowerment.

Although arguments discrediting the usefulness of neoliberal WID approaches have increased alongside growing evidence that these models have failed to alleviate women's poverty, the dominant pattern of defining women and focusing solely on their utilitarian role in mainstream economic processes has persisted. Currently, therefore, many models used today are framed, albeit often surreptitiously, by the WID paradigm that assumes the status of third-world women as passive objects. The assumption is that third-world women's economic and political empowerment depends on the resources of first-world women, and western<sup>5</sup> expertise. This paradigm therefore excludes women's voices both in defining what their needs are, and in the formulation of strategies for transformation.

Top-down assumptions of developmentalism and utilitarian approaches to women's public participation undergird models for gender planning at the local and community levels. The need to put "equality provisions" into place has taken in the South African situation, as in other contexts where planners and policy-makers are driven solely by urgent timelines and mandates for prompt delivery. What is therefore neglected is the heuristic value of time-consuming research and communication, a subject to which we return in what follows.

The notion of "public participation" in South Africa has become progressively more hazy. In particular, the increasingly *symbolic* definition of public participation, and the growing

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<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to acknowledge that Western here, as in the rest of this report, refers to the politics embedded in particular practical or intellectual projects. As Chandra Mohanty observes, it is important to define western feminism in terms of the confluence of effects, and not the regional or "racial" identification of those who produce it.

uncertainty about what constitutes sufficient public participation stems from government's failure to acknowledge the voices of the people at whom policies are aimed. The South African Constitution's vision of human rights and dignity is based on a long history of struggle for a society that respects all citizens irrespective of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability.

The gendered implications of the failure to acknowledge popular voices need to be spelt out. Since women are rarely as organised as men, infrequently have the same political, educational and financial resources that give access to public participation processes, the failure to implement measures that actively redress their marginalisation can be regarded as a form of political exclusion and injustice.

In the equitable process of becoming accountable and making redress, local government has a particular role to play. As Tumelo Kgosimemele argues:

Gender becomes increasingly relevant to governance when there is unequal representation, restrictions and barriers to women's citizenship, and when there are no significant changes in women's living conditions and access to basic facilities...The paradigm of democracy has made it possible for governments to commit themselves to the ensuring of human rights of the people they serve. This has been seen by government taking responsibility to ensure that the day-to-day lives of its constituents are of quality, as opposed to that of apartheid.

### **2.3 Women's Public Participation in a Global Context**

The current impasse in many women's experiences of justice and freedom becomes even more pronounced when we consider the political context in which many women experience ongoing injustices and deprivation. In a recent discussion of the disjuncture between struggles for democratic citizenship under apartheid and the ongoing struggles for substantive citizenship in the present, it has been argued that:

Contemporary South Africa reveals far less evidence of the sustained and widespread debate, networking and activism that raised public awareness about feminisms in previous decades. ... Feminist activism and discourses during the 1990s also incorporated animated controversy about race, class and knowledge production... The visibility and impact of discourses about gender transformation in the present day are significantly different... As Shireen Hassim argues, “The idea of gender equality is thus increasingly reduced to a vague set of ‘good intentions’, which are rarely translated into meaningful policy and ideological demands” (2006: 368). Sectoral forms of gender activism and inclusionary politics fail to “impact laterally on the political agendas of other social movements and in civil society more generally” (Lewis, Hussen and van Vuuren, *Africa*, 18, p 44).

The stagnation of political debate and the relative silence of civil society in the present has much to do with the distinctive trajectory of South African political struggles and the mainstreaming of gender activism into democratic governance. “Mainstreaming”, in the sense of integrating struggles for gender justice into class and anti-colonial transformation, has been a priority in postcolonial contexts as diverse Brazil and India. Yet a comparison between these reveals that the state’s shift towards neo-liberalism and an open-door policy for capital has been far more pronounced in South Africa than in, for example, India or Brazil, where the state has been made to remain more accountable to countries’ inhabitants (see Roy, 2013). On one hand, this is a result of the overtly accommodative nature of the South African transition, with neo-liberal GEAR macro-economic policies replacing the inroads into national redistribution in the early years of post-apartheid transition.

At another level, it has to do with the unique nature of feminism within the postcolonial state. Anupama Roy provides a suggestive discussion of this by comparing India, Brazil and South Africa. Focusing on the extent to which each country has - both in the colonial past and the neo-imperial present, rendered citizenship “strange”, she shows that feminist and civil society activism in Brazil and India have involved far more of a substantive emphasis

on “making citizenship familiar”. Her conclusions are borne out in the critical work on citizenship among feminists including Shireen Hassim and Amanda Gouws. As both show, the evolution of femocracy, in which elite women were successively incorporated into the class structure of the state, alongside state control over gendered legislation and change profoundly eroded a bottom-up process in which formerly disenfranchised communities, including marginalized women, could concertedly make citizenship familiar.

As the arguments above suggest, the South African state in many ways plays a covertly authoritarian role in containing popular resistance and guarding the interests of elites and foreign capital. Soon, for example, the replacement of the South African retailing industry by the American retailer, Walmart, will increase unemployment among large numbers of women in Cape Town, with this move explicitly indicating the state’s capitulation to the interests of foreign capital. More recently, the “Secrecy Bill” is a startling example of the state’s determined effort to control public resources and participation through monopolising public information and bolstering the triumphant official myth of South Africa as a newly affluent “rainbow nation”.

Describing trends at the end of the twentieth century, Castells lumped all sub-Saharan countries together to argue that these had jointly deteriorated in their “relative position in trade, investment, production and consumption vis-à-vis all other areas of the world” (1998; 2005rpt: 82-82). Yet within Africa, the South African government has played a singularly vanguardist role in orchestrating neo-liberal capitalism on the continent. Managing a robust economy, the South African state currently performs the role of a regional centre throughout Africa, extending its imperialist economic, cultural and political influence throughout the region via trade, information dissemination, the mass media, popular culture, commodity exports and the control of many Africans’ mobility and labour. Those most adversely affected by this imperial control are of course the African region’s women, whose roles in reproduction (for example, through their coerced purchase of commodity items from South Africa,) or roles in the formal and informal economy are dictated by economic systems created and managed from South Africa. The neo-liberal and

neo-imperialist strategies of the current South African state therefore have implications not only for marginalised women in South Africa, but also for large numbers of women throughout the African region.

Within this landscape, the management of information, how information is linked to and conceals power, how information constructs official myths and recasts the character and role of the post-apartheid state, *and* how marginalised groups, especially poor women are prevented from accessing or creating critical knowledge information networks to participate actively in governance are crucial sites of intervention for digital technologies aimed at democratising the participatory sphere. Thus the argument in the main proposal for the “Making Local Governance Work for Women” Project encapsulates the assumptions and challenges for this South African research:

The theory and practice of development and social change must therefore adapt and evolve, carefully re-examining and reinterpreting the local, bringing the lens of power analysis to emergent patterns. For feminist scholars, especially from the South, the everyday lives of marginalised women, as they may be entangled with local histories and cultures, comprise the touchstone for theory and action. It is indeed the local, as it recasts itself in relation to social change that constitutes the immediate and tangible site of power for marginalised women.

#### **2.4 Young women and marginalization/social marginality.**

In South Africa we chose from the start to focus on young women (18-29), with our project being titled Young Women Govern South Africa. Socially marginalized young women constitute a group that is possibly more alienated from and ignorant of public information than other groups defined as targetable major constituencies – black men, black women, white men, white women, working-class black people; w-c black women, w-c black men

etc.)(See evidence in quantitative study). Having grown up as the inheritors of post-apartheid change, few have been involved in NGOs, CBOs or trade unions in the ways that a previous generation was. (See quantitative study). At the same time, their youth, sense of restlessness, and the fact that they are far more familiar with modern ICTs than a previous generation all mean that they form keen and enthusiastic participants in an ICT feminist activist project. (See article co-written by project team members, Lewis, Tigist and Van Vuuren, 2013).

With the shift of the project to the University of the Western Cape from the end of 2012, the Project was immediately able to set in place sound financial and accounting systems. Moreover, the Project was able to rely on a group of university students<sup>6</sup> who were eager to enhance their political skills and knowledge through involvement in this project. Our goal at this time was to draw on two distinct groups of socially marginalized young women: UWC students with fairly solid research and ICT skills, and young women from NGOs and “working-class” areas surround the university, who have strong leadership, mobilizing and other political skills, and demonstrated their commitment to activism (around gender justice and sexual rights issues).

Since its relocation to the University, there have been a number of challenges with recruiting and retaining a consistent group of non-students because of transport difficulties, the realities of their social location and their interest in material incentives, and the absence of a coordinating person deeply immersed in various NGOs in the Western Cape.

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“Working class” is a misnomer in the context of the widespread unemployment and anomie among numerous poor black people living in the Western Cape. Currently, many South women in rural, urban and peri-urban areas are unskilled, poorly educated, unemployed or find only casual work – often in the informal sector. Previously, many poor

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<sup>6</sup> As discussed in the section on context and elsewherebd, a

women of colour in Cape Town could find employment in this city's large manufacturing, food processing and other industries. With the growth of multinational companies and increasing labour specialization in the post-apartheid period, previous employment patterns have changed, and today, unemployment has increased, and has had a particularly destructive impact on *young* women and men. A conservative report by the Centre for Development and Enterprise indicates that in 2008, 65 percent of the four million South African youths between 15 and 24 were unemployed. Unemployment in the city of Cape Town has intersected with spiraling drug and alcohol abuse, violent crime and gangsterism in historically impoverished townships, and the social and health impact of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, many young women in impoverished central and outlying areas lack information and resources to further their education, are alienated from formal spheres of public influence and participation.

As many radical black women scholars and activists have acknowledged, it is vital to challenge the stereotyping of marginalized black women as perpetual victims.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the realities confronting marginalized women in South Africa's urban and peri-urban areas are enormous: Often, poor women are particularly vulnerable to situations of profound emotional, bodily, psychological and material insecurity – often both inside and beyond the home.

The different class backgrounds of participants, (ranging from poor to lower-middle-class)<sup>8</sup> raises the complexities of identifying “class location” among young South Africans today: class mobility and social status in contemporary South Africa is extremely fluid and volatile. For example, many young women students, who are first-generation university students, come from the same backgrounds which many poor and unemployed young women come from. Often, their nascent “middle-class” status rests on their hopes of securing jobs in an extremely competitive environment where unemployment – including

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Mary Hames (2006).

<sup>8</sup>Class membership is of course notoriously difficult to define, particularly in the context of the present fluidity of South African society. For the purposes of this study, however, class membership refers to the class origins of participants. The study yields insights into how and where class membership is complicated by other circumstances.

unemployment among graduates – is high. Their class status is therefore fairly precarious, and circumstances could easily lead to their moving back into the working class or “lumpenproletariat”.



Similarly, young women with few social advantages and little formal education can sometimes achieve breaks through their exceptional abilities or perseverance as, for example, artists, activists or employees in working environments where they are supported to improve their education and skills. The contextual and biographical experiences of our respondents is revealing about the class mobility and fluidity among young people in South Africa’s contemporary urban and peri-urban areas. Currently, socially marginalized young people face numerous structural challenges that inhibit their growth and access to education; at the same time, the absence of Apartheid’s draconian restrictions created – for *a minority* that has been able to seize opportunities – scope for rapid career advancement. Possibly even more importantly, however, post-apartheid has generated the neo-liberal illusion – especially among the youth – that individual achievement and material advancement are central and desirable goals in the new South Africa. While this illusion has been set in place with the post-apartheid government’s



increasingly neo-liberal policies, it has also been fed by a ferociously globalized commodity culture, by the mass media and by formal education.

Youth subjectivities - as shaped by *hopes of seizing opportunities* have been popularized especially by the media and advertising. And here, socially mobile young black women are identified as especially important and malleable subjects for investment. Such investment ranges between the policies targeting black women for training, skills development and business enterprises to commodity capitalist marketing and advertising. Whether the message of self-improvement is to encourage young women to alter their bodies or to invest in their education to “succeed”, developmental discourses have become increasingly aggressive and seductive in moulding the embodied subjectivities of young women. A quick look at the range of magazines, commodity products including clothing, haircare, skincare and “hygiene” products explicitly reveals the extent to which they cater to the minds and bodies of young women: teenage girls and young women have been persuaded that they can and should improve themselves in terms of their body image, their social aspiration. And it is this notion of possibility, of an envisaged self that is currently core to their ascribed subjectivities.



Neoliberalism has meshed with discourses of class and race in shaping this notion of self-improvement and possibility. Consequently, ideals of improvement – both bodily and political, have been attached to messages about race and class, messages that draw on

those that were set in place under settler colonialism and Apartheid. It is noteworthy that many of the messages about self-improvement in contemporary South African magazines targeting black consumers mirror those from the magazine *Drum* in the fifties. A publication that in many ways served to induct black South Africans into neo-liberal urban modernity, this magazine focused on the domestication and feminization of black women in terms of their aspirations to whiteness and middle-class-ness. The lightening of skin was in many ways a metaphor for this rebirth into a white world of urban modernity. In remarkably similar ways, advertising in post-apartheid and neo-liberal South Africa targets young black women as potential consumers of products that prefigure their renaissance into urban “sophistication”. And the over-riding message, as was the case decades before, is that young women have the innate capacity to launch themselves into a world of freedom of choice and aspiration.

Yet the subjectivities of young black women are not only repressively shaped by external pressures, As work on subjectivity by postcolonial scholars such as Stuart Hall shows, subjectivities are shaped by dynamic processes of *identification* in which “identity” remains an illusion to which social subjects aspire. Many postcolonial feminist scholars have gone further in demonstrating that feminized subjects are always contradictory subjects, subjects whose biographical experiences, political histories and unique locations within an assemblage of race, sexuality, class and global culture can paradoxically subvert, defy and unsettle dominant scripts of identity.



To a large extent, the methodology and theory driving this project grow out of this philosophical view of the subject: namely, that the subject is both shaped by and actively shapes her cultural, material and political universe. Avoiding a voluntarist notion of the subject's agencies, the study seeks to consider the detailed and often highly nuanced ways in which young women are affected by a cultural assemblage, yet simultaneously become agents with this assemblage. Our key objective, how to energize young women's political agencies through supporting the communicative, associational and civic power, is predicated on this view.

Patricia Hill Collins, Pumla Gqola and Elaine Salo have been central black feminist proponents of the theoretical view that young black women can exercise agency within the parameters of their repressive material and cultural worlds. Developing this notion with particular reference to public knowledge and cultural resources, Patricia Hill Collins shows how young black women in the US have utilized elements of the music industry to fashion their own repertoire of "hip hop feminism". Developing a similar argument in the South African Western Cape context, Elaine Salo analyses ways in which working class women in the gang and drug infested township of Manenberg have exercised agency in defining their femininities in particular ways. Sarah Nuttall's notion of self-styling, based on Foucault's, takes this analysis further in showing how young black South Africans in Johannesburg

eclectically use the resources of commodity culture to fashion themselves in ways that interrupt or unsettle entrenched legacies of race, class and identity. Nuttall describes the intricate modes of young people's making of the "self" in Johannesburg as follows:

The city itself becomes the engine for this self-styling. The emergence of new stylisations of the self, embedded in cultures of the body, represents one of the most decisive shifts of the post-apartheid era. (2009: 131)

A later sections' discussion of brand images in young women's discovery of "agency" demonstrates the extent to which appropriations of commodity items among *both* middle-class and poor young people functions as bricolage and allows many young women to draw on artifacts of commodity culture in developing a unique language of self-expression and political discourse. Generally, the analytical sections of this study show that the South African social imaginary provides fertile symbolic resources for young women to refashion themselves in ways that complicate their embodied subjectivities and, in the processes, hone their critical engagement and capacity to become active citizens. As also indicated, creativity and an eclectic and inventive engagement with various forms of expression have been key to this active citizenship, with young women turning adventurously to the symbolic resources that populate their cognitive and cultural landscapes.

## **2.5. The Information Revolution and Young Women in South Africa**

In responding to the particularities of context, the ICT intervention driven from the Western Cape has, from the start, concentrated on women's *active* citizenship to ensure that young women *establish control* over information. This control would include what information could be created in terms of its content and its form, how it can be used, and mobilizing it in ways that directly enhance women's subjective and social needs and those of their communities. This latter objective means that they inventively adapt information to take collective action against various forms of injustice. It is therefore important that the South African intervention has focused on enhancing women's skills at, and their control over, the production and management of information, rather than merely facilitating their *access to* existing information. Whether such information is produced by existing NGOs,

CBOs, local, provincial or national government, it has the potential to alienate, effectively disenfranchise and further marginalize young women as critically informed citizens. In this sense it has actually worked to make citizenship strange, rather than familiar. Yvette Abrahams' work on the Groot Drakenstein Municipality has persuasively shown how, in the first decade after democracy, many women in the farmland areas of the Western Cape remain profoundly estranged from the discourse, procedures and meanings of local governance. And this estrangement is often caused, rather than alleviated by the work of many "gender experts" and municipal officials' languages and methods for galvanizing public participation.

The repressive and authoritarian effects of information conveyed by government structures are often *not* obvious. As the study of findings below shows, young women may not necessarily experience this deluge of knowledge as overtly repressive. Many, however, experience it as sterile, cold, abstract and disconnected from their embodied experiences as young, classed, gendered and sexualized subjects with particular experiences of estrangement, marginalization, disempowerment and empowerment.

Far more important for the purposes of this study are the effects and forms of "progressive" knowledge often conveyed by NGO. The surreptitiously prescriptive nature of top-down approaches in the ostensibly progressive use of electronic media is evident in recent forms of advocacy among NGOs confronting violence against women. It is noteworthy here that some of the most innovative and apparently "open" forms of communication, such as MIXIT, have been used within these organizations' community work with young women. According to Sarrazin, MIXIT, because it works on a range of mobile phones regardless of the phone brand and requires only a basic phone, has considerable potential for activist networking. Consequently, applications such as MIXIT have enabled a small organization Free Gender, (from which many of the Younwomen-govern South Africa participants come), to communicate instantly with black lesbians in the townships and organize members to events or marches. In an interview, the organization's director, Funeka Soldaat stated that "Internet is still expensive and our

members do not have money for this, but they do have mobile phones and *MXIT* is free, so we can constantly communicate with people.” She focuses especially on the need for mobilizing in the face of the rape of lesbians, saying that: ‘It is amazing how quick we are able to mobilize people and spread the message of Free Gender; we do not have resources, but we know how to organize locally’.

Similar cyboptimistic views have been espoused by the former deputy director of the Network on Violence Against Women in the Western Cape, Claire Mathonsi: According to Mathonsi, communication is key in the advocacy lobbying and support mechanisms of the network and they employed a variety of ICTs in message to partners and members: ‘We have a diversity of members in urban and rural settings, they speak different languages, with different needs and they come from varied of socio-economic backgrounds’. (Interview with Crystal Orderson)

Although many organizations for young women provide compelling evidence of the positive effects of using ICTs for advocacy and mobilization, they tend to see ICTs as neutral media for transmitting information and knowledge that is assumed to be beneficial and liberating. It may be far more important to define ICTs as politically and discursively loaded technologies that are intricately connected to struggles for and about power and knowledge.

In responding to the myriad challenges of the information revolution, South Africa has pioneered a number of innovative open-source initiatives. These range from the implementation of *MXIT* to the establishment of open source software that allows individuals with minimal skills and resources to set up blogs and websites. At universities, the driving of open-source initiatives and efforts to ensure democratic e-governance have meant the introduction of policies around democratizing knowledge in universities as key sites of knowledge creation and sharing. Initiatives at universities are especially important in signaling their renewed accountability to popular education.

Much has been made by optimistic liberal commentators about the opportunities for “free” and “democratic” communication through digital technologies. At the start of the democratizing process, South Africa seemed to take up the challenge of integrating government’s commitment to public participation with comprehensive telecommunications reform. Yet many have argue that South Africa has a sub-optimal ICT policy and regulatory environment. The reasons for this include:

- Lack of policy implementation and follow-up.
- The fact that the Department of Communications as well as the Ministers holding portfolios in these departments have often fluctuated in recent years.
- The fact that high prices for bandwidth, technology and hardware is not being alleviated by competition, and the government has not regulated an environment conducive to competitors likely to lower prices for cellphones, bandwidth, computers and software or applications.

While these factors suggest a bleak scenario for ICT reform, South Africa at present does have a policy-rich envorinment for democratizing telecommunications, and this can be made to work in the interests of groups who are made sufficiently aware of their potential. Moreover, sites of innovation and competituion such as the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), which launched an Open Source Centre to help stimulate the adoption of open source software technologies in Africa and Canonical Ltd, producers of Ubuntu software encourage a future South Africa where ict sources, usage, software development and modification are geared towards broader societal needs.

### 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Theoretical Mapping

The phenomenal explosion of feminist work on citizenship in the last decade or so has shed considerable light on broad issues related to belonging, the state, globalization, nationalism, women's agencies, redistribution and social justice. As such, this interdisciplinary work addresses questions such as:

- “What constitutes political agencies for subaltern subjects?”
- “What are the hidden sites and forms of “political expression for subaltern groups?”
- “How do various layers of authoritarian and oppressive institutions, relations and discourses constrain subaltern voices?”

It therefore constitutes a valuable and rich source for analyzing young women's agencies in the context of our ICT activist research.

The literature on citizenship, women and gender is extremely diverse in terms of its political orientation and agendas. Our preliminary observations and insights into the challenges that young women face in inhabiting local governance structures and processes has led us to make sense of their locations with reference to theorizing and literature that questions narrowly rights-based approaches to citizenship. Framing this work is a significant body of postcolonial feminist theorizing and scholarship: studies of gendered subjects whose voices, agencies become extremely difficult for researchers to access because of their imbrication in multiple networks of dominant ideology, institutions and power. Gayatri Spivak's widely influential notion in postcolonial studies, of the “gendered subaltern that cannot speak” aptly conveys the situation of the young women of this study: invariably spoken for and about, but rarely “heard”.

In complementing our attention to how young women are situated in multiple networks of power, we draw on theorizing that seeks to “listen” to the silences, uneven-ness and also deep yearnings of persons who are frequently misrepresented or silenced. We use the leads offered by feminist and postcolonial cultural studies and media and communication



studies which seek to make sense of gendered subjectivities in the context of globalized popular culture. We also draw on the methodological insights of postcolonial feminists who have sought to question their own preconceptions through seeing others' worlds from *their* points of view. Consequently, in the same way that the Tanzanian feminist, Marjorie Mblinyi has described her struggle to relinquish her own beliefs by understanding how her research subject, a Tanzania peasant challenges them, we have sought to "learn by doing", jettisoning objectives which we initially found important in "making local government work for young women", and allowing ourselves to learn from their political energies.

### **3.2 Citizenship, Feminist Activism and the Challenge of "Making Citizenship Familiar"**

Dominant conceptualizations of citizenship are based on ideas about the equal membership of citizens "across social structures implying equal/uniform application of the law, and the promise that no person or group is privileged before or by the law"(Roy, 2013: 240). This equality involves access to constitutional rights and obligations (Hassim, 1999; Turner, 2009; Hermes, 2013; Roy, 2013). According to McEwan, however, this conception of citizenship is "an abstract, universal and western-centric notion of the individual and is consequently unable to recognize either the political relevance of gender or of non-western perspectives and experiences" (2005: 971). Many radical scholars argue, however, that discourses of citizenship offer insights into the difficult relationships between individuals in socially subordinate groups, and the state. Thus, "to enjoy the full potential of social, cultural, political and economic privileges offered, the citizen must negotiate a range of institutions, from the educational to the authoritarian" (Arvanitakis, 2013:16). Roy echoes this when she writes that "citizenship cannot be a universal concept (as in applicability) because of its development out of a particular conjuncture of structural and cultural conditions peculiar to the West and its experiences with modernity" (2013: 251).

The problems of translating universal rights into what actually benefits embodied women is raised by McEwan:

As with other post-independent states, the struggle for women lies in the (im)possibilities of translating de jure equality into de facto equality, and of

translating state level commitment to gender equality into tangible outcomes at local and individual levels. (2005: 972)

Postcolonial feminists focusing on contexts such as Brazil, India and Africa as well as feminists such as radical feminists such as Nancy Fraser, dealing with the priorities of redistributive justice for transnational feminism reject the neoliberal conceptualisation of citizenship and “demonstrate[e] how the constitutive exclusion of women in [liberal] theories and practices has been key to feminists’ expanded notion of politics. Asserting that citizenship is dependent on a set of arrangements and practices that are gendered” (Miraftab, 2004: 2). In other words, the simple formal inclusion of women might change the structure of citizenship but not the power dynamics created by social and economical inequalities. Writing about South Africa, Shireen Hassim points out that “the demand for a gender- differentiated citizenship, on the other hand, while distinguishing between men and women, tends to treat women as a homogeneous grouping with similar experiences and values” (Hassim, 1999:9). Mary Hames demonstrates how this is played out when women from poor communities (similar to those from which the subjects of our action research come) and with very little formal schooling are “educated” about their rights in a workshop. She concludes that trying to explain the rights to which they are entitled to them - in the absence of addressing their distinct educational, social and political locations - amounts to giving them “paper rights” (Hames, 2006). Moreover, it obscures and depoliticises communities’ everyday political experiences – associated, for example, with poor service delivery and day-to-day socio-economic and domestic struggles.

Theorizing about such experiences in third-world contexts, the influential postcolonial feminist, Nira Yuval-Davis argues “citizenship should consider the issue of women’s citizenship not only in contrast to that of men, but also in relation to women’s affiliation to dominant or subordinate groups” (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 4). This means “acknowledging that universal inclusion does not exist because in reality citizenship is based on power exercised through social, economic and political structures that perpetuate the exclusion of certain social groups” (McEwan, 2005: 972). Among others, Nira Yuval-Davis offers the notion of “intersectionality” as a lens and theoretical framework to think through women’s

entanglement in multiple power relations. Developing Yuval-Davis's (1997) "multilayered" conception of citizenship, Roy critically writes about 'intersecting' and 'multilayered' against essentialised assumptions of citizenship:

The notion that citizenship is multi-layered and dialogical, not only recognizes multiple political subjectivities and simultaneous membership in several political communities, it also identifies the sites of 'exclusions'. The insertion of the variable – exclusionary citizenship – concentrates on the way the different positionings of women affect their citizenship in policy areas such as education, planning, welfare, etc., and how these various positionings contribute to the construction of boundaries – between national collectivities and between private and public. The inclusion of a broad canvas and intersecting –dialogical layers of membership also allow them to examine how these intersections and their different/discrepant positionings give rise to 'ambivalences' or 'ambivalent citizens' on the 'borders' of citizenship viz (Roy, 2013: 257).

Work that analyzes intersectionality acknowledges what should be central to understanding subordinate women's social and political experiences: the "difference" among citizens based on their particular identities and how these affect their rights as citizens. Roy states that "the negotiation of these differences and the specificities of contexts may generate at different times and places diverse sets of practices, institutional arrangements, modes of social interaction and future orientations" (Roy, 2013: 256).

As the work on intersectionality and difference reveals, many postcolonial and transnational feminists have insisted on a shift in thinking about citizenship beyond instrumental political participation and legal frameworks. In order to do this, McEwan argues, "feminist conceptualisation must think beyond notions of 'impasse' or 'hollowness', to rethink the public/private distinction that still frames many debates about citizenship and to consider the emancipatory potential of gendered subjectivity as it relates to both men and women" (2005: 971). Echoing these ideas in the context of South Africa, Hassim argues that "the central contribution of feminism to the debate on citizenship is to focus on the issue of human agency" (1999:10). She argues "if citizenship is to be the basis for

dealing with inequalities in access to power and resources, feminists need to treat social policy critically” (Hassim, 1999:16). These include “the relationships between individuals and the state, the scope of the state's authority over society, and the nature of political participation of individuals, particularly women, in a democracy” (Hassim, 1999:6).

Thus, while formal citizenship may be a meaningless for certain young women, their agency and civic engagement demand nuanced attention. Describing the apparent paradox of young people’s apathy alongside their determination to exercise agency, Veloso writes:

For some, citizenship and the forms of access to it are still determined by their marginalized, stratified, and racialized subject position. For others, responsible, active, participating, and ‘radical democratic’ citizenship can take place... (2008: 56).

Crucial to the identification of agency for critics such as Hassim and Veloso are “political spaces” that determine how subjects from particular groups can demonstrate their distinctive agency as active citizens. McEwan theorizes the spatial contours of agencies as follows:

Despite exclusions in officialized spaces of citizenship, possibilities exist for a more substantive citizenship to emerge. Foucault’s (1986) notion of the ‘strategic reversibility’ of power relations suggests that these are always already sites of resistance and contain the productive possibilities for subversion, appropriation and reconstitution; spaces of invitation produced by the South African state are also inhabited by people with alternative ideas, with potential for expanding the agency of those invited to participate and a different kind of participation than that envisaged. (2005: 977)

### **3.3 Marginalized Agencies and Limits of Formal Citizenship**

Developing the feminist critique of formal understandings of citizenship and participation Miraftab (2004) and McEwan (2005) invoke the metaphoric meanings of political space. Miraftab (2004) explores the distinction between “invited” and “invented” spaces of citizenship, arguing that spaces of invitation are not only exclusionary, but permit limited

opportunity and access to those who are invited. More often “invited” spaces exhibit a hierarchical political power structure and have fixed views of participatory citizenship. She urges for the recognition of “informal” and “invented” spaces of citizenship, and for recognizing how they transcend “formal” discourses as weapons through which to challenge and to resist. Echoing the views of feminists attentive to many women’s nuanced agencies, Miraftab affirms: “the fluidity of grassroots collective action across both the invited and the invented spaces of citizenship and acknowledge, as well, the significance of the invented spaces of insurgency and resistance”(2004: 1).

The use of ICTs in resistance is often defined in narrowly instrumentalist terms as though ICTs were neutral instruments responding to the “invitation” to take up dominant definitions of citizenship, rather than as malleable instruments for inventing citizenship. A small but growing body of research that focuses on the nexus of subject’s complex agencies, popular culture and the use of modern communication technologies provides concepts and analytical leads for exploring “invented” spaces for subjects’ self-defined expressions of citizenship. Nancy Fraser’s powerful response to Habermas’ notion of “the public” in the form “subaltern counterpublic” has proved very influential in analyzing socially marginalized group’s imaginative and determined efforts to “speak back” to and through the repressive communicative networks that define “the public sphere”. In exploring young women’s political and imaginative energies, we are indebted to Fraser’s formulation.

One of the dangers of celebrating the agencies of subordinate groups is the tendency to instrumentalise these responses as clearcut “political acts”. Hermann Wasserman, avoiding a “naïve celebration of resistance” (2013:10), draws attention to a “nuanced assessment” of how cultural expression can become a “platform for the articulation of controversial or popular political views” (Wasserman, 2013:10). Like Wasserman, writers such as Purnima Gqola, Adam Haupt, Sarah Nuttall and, in the United States, Patricia Hill Collins have researched and theorized about a new generation of young socially subordinate groups who use the resources of popular and commodity culture to define agendas for change on their own terms. Although not all this work acknowledges the far-reaching transformations to communicative systems in recent years, it offers a valuable framework for thinking

through the invented spaces of citizenship which the young women in this study have struggled to craft.

For marginalized young South African women, who navigate especially complex routes of oppression and exploitation at the local, national and global levels, “alternative spaces of participation are being shaped by groups [invented], organisations and activists that have particular consequences for the nature of empowerment and practice of citizenship”(2005: 979). These newly invented spaces, regardless of their popularity and durability, are strongly related to particularized, as opposed to “national” identities. As McEwan puts it, “alternative spaces of citizenship lend visibility to identities and interests that are given shape by collective political action; they are, therefore, important spaces for the exercise of citizenship and realisation of rights” (2005: 981). At the same time, the public expression of national belonging and contribution of these groups can become inward-looking. As McEwan explains: “Paradoxically, alternative citizenship spaces are rarely inclusive and often rely on oppositional processes of identity formation for the creation of a common purpose”. (McEwan, 2005: 980). Therefore, “simply creating these new spaces might not be enough to empower citizens or bring about greater participation in decision-making and resource distribution” (McEwan, 2005: 975). Our action research highlights the paradoxical research challenge of supporting *and* re-shaping the agencies of young women - in ways that both respect their distinct locations and needs for “invented” spaces of citizenship and that avoid the pitfalls of sectarian and inward-turning identity politics.

### 3.4. Young Women’s Subjectivities

Sonia Livingstone, Nick Couldry and Tim Markham argue that “young people are often positioned by even the most well-meaning public sector sites not as citizens but as citizens-in-waiting” (2007:5). At a global level, many have bewailed the widespread sense of apathy to politics among the youth in urban and peri-urban areas s affected by neo-liberal globalization and commodity capitalism. Commentators in South Africa have pointed to the lack of involvement of young South African men and women at various government-

national, provincial, or municipal levels- over issues ranging from service delivery to violence against children and women

In explaining this, it has been argued that “young people are often conceived as a ‘dangerous’ alienated group threatening to adult society; or, mid-way between these two, as ‘incomplete’ adults/citizens and therefore in need of guidance” (Steenveld, 2013: 23). As a result, the youth finds themselves in a “confusing and contradictory patterns of protection and pressure, with conflicting perceptions of their abilities and inadequacies, rendering their social presence inconsequential and their social power invisible” (Kurth-Schai 1988: 116; cited in Steenveld, 2013: 23). Some state that South African politics positions young people in terms of the dictum that “young people should always respect their elders” and that the domain of political participation and decision-making space should remain that of the “old”, those who fought for liberation and ensured freedom for the young generation (see, Lewis, Tigist and Van Vuuren, 2013).

Complementing this view of youth inadequacy, are more analytical perspectives which explain the political realities of young South Africans in a post-apartheid context. Malila (2013) argues that their lives should be compared with their parents’ life struggles, with the youth in contemporary South Africa often being seen as those who inherit the fruits of their parents’ struggles and a country with democratic governance system. She writes:

The parents of the Born Frees had a ‘cause’ against which to protest politically and with which to engage at the political level. This new generation, however, is imagined to have been given all the things they need to succeed by the new democratic government – education, employment opportunities, a racially inclusive society, and much more. (Malila, 2013: 5)

Since the youth of today are seen as the “new” and “born free” generation, with access to all rights, the expectation is often that they should use these rights to engage in everyday citizenship practice. In relation to this Malila writes:

The term the ‘Born Frees’, itself epitomises the expectations placed on these young people. They are expected to be free of the burdens of the past, to be free

of racial, political and economic prejudice and to flourish in a country which offers them so much. (Malila, 2013: 5)

Young people are often also seen as having a sense of entitlement, one which public intellectual Jonathan Jansen describes as the syndrome of “Our turn to eat”. Jansen argues that South African politics is increasingly expressed through “we demand” this and that. He argues that such culture of political struggle originates from the ‘old’ generation:

Of course we know where this demandist culture comes from. Those of us who lived on both sides of apartheid know about protracted struggles marked by demands: demand the end of unjust laws, of racist government, of separate schooling, of forced removals, and scores of bad things we fought against. Then and now, there is nothing wrong with demanding things from government, whether that authority is legitimate or not. But when this demandist culture transfigures our humanity, renders active citizens impotent, negates reflection, and leaves us beholden to the state for good things, then something has gone horribly wrong in the public arena. (Jansen, 2013: 9)

Contrary to Jansen’s argument, Wasserman and Garman stress that political struggles in post-apartheid South Africa should be taken as indicators of how much, “the ANC has turned local government structures into a site for the (often inadequate) delivery of desperately-needed and essential services (shelter, water, electricity, schools, clinics) thereby making South Africa’s poorest people into clients dependent on patronage”(2013:2). Thus, responses ranging from apathy to “demandism” invite us to reflect carefully on “how and when audiences turn into publics... to find out where and how they form opinions. Public opinion formation, in terms of a shared analysis or agenda for a common future, is ultimately the key ingredient of the type of bonding that we call citizenship (Hermes, 2006: 300).

A further concern in thinking through young *women’s* subjectivities in South Africa concerns their location within a neo-liberal global context. Here, young women are often identified as those in whom business, donors, government should invest. The



advertisement below shows how the Democratic Alliance (DA) political party advocates for ICT skills training for black woman.

### **Helping young black women fill ICT skills gaps in SA**



IT skills service provider, Rigatech, is taking on the challenge of developing and executing integrated training and internship programmes to address specific ICT skills shortages in South Africa.

Concern has been expressed that the shortage of ICT skills in South Africa will constrain government's goal to achieve a sustainable annual six per cent growth rate in GDP and to halve unemployment and poverty by 2014.

The ICT skills shortage is often attributed to the mismatch between the supply of skills and the skills demanded in the labour market, further aggravated by a loss of skills to other countries that offer higher salaries and better conditions of employment. Additionally, many organisations are reluctant to pay for the creation of skills, seeking rather to outsource their requirements.

The 2011 ITWeb-JCSE Skills Survey found that many software developers, high- end integrators and other ICT service providers continue to complain that their growth is constrained by a shortage of relevant skills. According to the survey, current demand amounts to 20 000 to 30 000 job opportunities, or 10% to 15% of the total ICT workforce.

Two thirds of companies responding to the ITWeb survey reported that they were severely impacted by a shortage of ICT skills. According to recruiters and employers, application development, mobility, high-end infrastructure and analytics are just a few of the areas where the industry has a dearth of skills.

Rigatech aims to address these skills shortages and to provide realistic and sustainable solutions to developing ITC skill sets within South Africa, particularly amongst young black women whose potential has been sorely overlooked in the past.

"We have resolved to take an innovative approach to addressing sustainable job creation by combining profitability with a real contribution to social development," says Rigatech Chief Executive Evelyn Naidoo. "To realise this objective our aim is to provide previously disadvantaged women with skills and experience in the ICT industry." Naidoo possesses more than 35 years' experience in the banking sector and is driven to lead and inspire young women who are aspiring to acquire new skills.

Rigatech is presently piloting a training syllabus which aims to develop and execute optimal integrated

training and internship programmes to address specific ICT and business needs and skills shortages. This two-year process includes faculty training at Rigatech, alignment with university syllabi through student mentoring followed by internship placement.

Collaborations with a number of corporate IT organisations will see these companies providing specialist skills and mentorship incubators within their organisations. After a screening process of eligible candidates, qualifying black women will be selected for the programme and placed with these companies for in-house training.

“We are laying the foundations for our projects success by creating a pipeline of potential trainees, building awareness of the programme, developing assessment processes, and packaging our training and evaluation processes for certification,” Naidoo explains. “The final steps will be to establish placements for our graduates into identified roles within chosen IT organisations or to facilitate the shadowing of existing roles for eventual placement within the company.”

Backing the new concern is parent company Logikal Consulting, a leading BEE multinational that provides integrated telecommunications, financial services and public sector solutions. The company is lending both capital and other resources, such as skills transfers and job placements through its team of experienced technicians and thought leaders.



*Poster from the Democratic Alliance's Student's Organization depicts "mixed race" couple and conveys the message that young black women, as a newly visible group, have the right to choose – including white male partners.*

Through messages about self-empowerment, individual determination, and, most importantly, the liberal myth of “freedom of choice”, young women are encouraged to define themselves as free-wheeling and atomized agents. And although many might remain theoretically aware of the impact of authoritarian, patriarchal and ageist institutions and practices in shaping and constraining these choices, they might still subconsciously internalize the view of their autonomy to act independently of social forces, and mirror the

seductive neo-liberal myth-making of their surrounding world. As discussed in the analytical section, this sense of freedom has ambiguous effects. On one level, it can lead to a self-assurance that border on solipsism and contempt for what is perceived as “weakness”, “inadequacy” and “failure” in material terms. At the same time, it seems to equip many young women who confront daunting challenges of violence, homelessness and impoverishment, with a deep resilience and confidence in “the Self”. As demonstrated, such confidence is a powerful resource for defying circumstances of othering in workplaces, communities and homes.

### **3.5. Social and Digital Inclusion/Citizenship**

Roy draws attention to the potential of the “cyber world as a space of citizenship formation and performance, where a diversity of movements come together to protest against the state and demand an end of corruption, nepotism and autocratic rule” (Roy, 2013: 264). Our research with young women has laid bare the extent to which young people can voice their political concerns against the backdrop of inhibiting conventional political discourses through the unconventional platform of cyberspace (Hartley, 2010). Hartley calls these ever growing “invented” spaces of popular media usage “media citizenship” (2010: 239). He argues that citizens who are excluded from the “formal” citizenship practice, are most likely to use different media to engage in civil matters within their group and/or communities to construct identities, associations and communities (Hartley, 2010).

In deepening these insights, Wasserman and Garman point out that “media citizenship” should not only be understood within the context of “serious” political engagement and deliberation, but also popular media texts “that are ostensibly focused on leisure and entertainment; soap operas, hip hop music, radio talk shows” (2013:2). These should be taken seriously as they represent platforms for public discourse about everyday “citizenship” realities. Furthermore, as Arvanitakis stresses, “media and media interactions are fundamental to understanding the way young people engage with civic processes that can develop or undermine their sense of agency – or both, as circumstances and personalities provide” (2013: 16).

Hermes argues that Internet-based communication and different ICT technologies “do not necessarily produce new citizens but that they do provide for new and important citizenship practices” (Hermes, 2006: 295). Hermes writes:

The Internet is but one modality built with new technology but it encapsulates various tendencies that define the cultural usage of new ICTs: it bridges public and private spaces, it is used for entertainment, for consultation and information and for communication. It offers new means to connect information and experience (2006: 304).

As such, it is important to explore how the uses of different media interactions are fundamental to young women’s efforts to express and affirm their sense of self and express opinions about personhood, as well as civil and political matters. In many cases, the divide between the personal, the civic and the political is in fact often very blurred. It also remains the case, that *invitations* to civic political engagement on various ICT platforms are prone to long-established patterns of exclusion on the basis of age, gender and class. They recreate and reinforce the same kind of political dynamics that have undermined women agencies in public domains including politics. Vromen (2007) and Livingstone et al. (2007) argue that often websites are used to politically reinforce an already-existing political and civil status quo. They can therefore “focus on government-directed information delivery and consultation with individuals rather than active processes of citizen ownership and collective forms of participation” (Vromen 2007: 61).

Alongside ageist, gendered and authoritarian power relations, class position and access to resources continue to be a huge barrier to marginalized young women’s empowerment as citizens through their engagement with ICTs. Vromen argues that “the Internet is not providing a radical change for young people in general by facilitating new participation” (2007: 61). As indicated previously, South Africa, despite the great strides that it has made in pioneering software such as ubuntu, or applications such as MXIT, has lagged behind many other countries in generating substantively popular access to mobile phones, mobile networks, landlines and bandwidth quality and costs, not to mention resources such as computers, laptops and tablets.

Recognizing how entrenched inequalities create the digital divide has shaped the cyber-sceptics' position. Bonder, writing about Latin American and the Caribbean, challenges the exaggeratedly optimistic argument that cyberspace can be constitute a knowledge commons and be appropriated for all inhabitants' dynamic engagement engagement with civic matters. She writes:

The scandalous growth of poverty and of the levels of social inequity, together with the weakness of the national states and the lack of public investment in strategic sectors for human development, such as education or health; together with other alarming signs such as the lack of transparency of the state administration of budgets for social programs and purchase of technological infrastructure, the concentration of multimedia in the hands of transnational corporations, and the absence of regulations regarding the rates of telecommunication services, do not allow us to be very optimistic, at least in the short term (2002: 4).

Echoing Bonder's sense of outrage in relation to South African youth, Livingstone et al. (2007: 10) suggest that:

Youth participation might be better redressed through offline initiatives, strengthening the opportunities structures of young people's lives ... rather than building websites which, though they will engage a few, will struggle to reach the majority or, more important, to connect that majority to those with power over their lives in a manner that young people themselves judge effective and consequential.

Our analysis will demonstrate that the cautions of the cyberpessimists such as Bonder or Livingstone above are important in encouraging an interrogation of the social obstacles that currently affect many young women's use of ICTs in urban and peri-urban South Africa. But we also avoid the cynical dismissal of the value of ICTs. For example, rather than seeing them as "indulgences" leading to a distraction from civic purpose, we follow Vromen in considering the steady but uneven appropriation of new media tools and technology by

young people, irrespective of their class positions, and how these have become “indispensable for a variety of reasons such as information distribution, sharing news and information, event organization, keeping in contact, and for facilitating debate within both offline and Internet-based communities” (2007: 61). Moreover, we register that the appropriation of ICTs in relation to a “sensitivity to space is central to understanding concepts of citizenship and the abilities of different people to exercise their rights as citizens” (2000: 628).

As many cyberoptimists show, cyberspace is providing important political space for young people to “have a right to express themselves, for their voices to become visible ...to ‘be heard’ [through] a common feature of the design characteristics and interface of youth civic websites (Livingstone et al., 2007: 4). Moreover “young people are more likely to participate online than take part in more traditional forms of politics” (Livingstone et al., 2007: 9). One reason is that the Internet provides a new way of participating in politics, “youth websites are built on the supposed parallels between young people’s preferred style of interaction (dialogic, diverse, alternative, dynamic) and the infrastructure of the internet for “community-oriented” young people.

As the invocation of the building of youth websites indicates, however, the assumption about youth here is the universalized assumption that youth will have the skills, resources and time to use the Internet, computers and computer skills. We are wary of the Western-centric and classist cyberoptimist view that “unlimited information available through the Internet will foster an increase in political knowledge, that people will express their views freely on email, lists and in chat rooms, and will subsequently become more active in community politics” (Vromen 2007: 49). In other words, we continue to explore difficult questions around whether the “new media” can, as argued by the cyber optimists resolve enormous social challenges and create progressive emancipatory possibilities for young women to use their own (as opposed to others’) voices *and* be heard by one another and by those in positions of power. We are therefore conscious of the ways that “the structures of the offline world” lead the “new media [to] offer both reactionary as well as transformative possibilities” (Livingstone et al. 2007: 9).

In reconciling our understanding of “offline realities” with our confidence in the liberating potential of ICTs for marginalized women, we draw on the notion of “digital inclusion”.. According to Notley, “the concept of digital inclusion differs from that of the digital divide” (2009: 8) in that digital inclusion makes a distinction between access and usage, and shifts emphasis towards the imaginative and determined usage of technology (2009: 8), irrespective of what form this usage takes. Digital inclusion is specifically concerned with ICT use and its outcome in societal civic matters irrespective of the “levels” of ICT resources or skills used by particular individuals and groups. Notley emphasizes that social inclusion and digital inclusion should be understood as “connecting young people’s ICT access and use with their ability to participate in society in ways that they value”(2009: 8). Some use the Internet to obtain information about public issues that affect them and also to forge alliances and dialogues with their peers or certain organizations. The question, perhaps then is, to what extent are individuals allowed to independently communicate their experience without being excluded socially and/or in the digital world.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Practices of Feminist Participatory Action Research

For a number of influential researchers (Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, and Baldwin (2012), action research is primarily defined by its research design. This involves the use of established research techniques selected on the basis of ‘best-fit’ for the identified research problem. They argue that action research becomes Participatory Action Research (PAR) “depending on who is involved in each of those stages, and to what extent” (Mackenzie, et al. 2012: 12). Participatory action research methodological framework is developed through a process that is inclusive of research participants as collaborators and knowledge creators. This section reflects on the conceptual and (related) participatory action methodological framework used in the practical and research aspects of the Young Women Govern South Africa (YWGSA) project. This methodology, of course, is also reflected in the *research about* this activist project, research which includes quantitative studies, this qualitative report as well as film representations.

Many researchers agree that “the main purpose of using a PAR is to create an opportunity for researchers and research participants to learn from each other by operating within principles of democratic participation “(Mackenzie, et al. 2012: 12). It is also argued that PAR addresses power imbalances and empowers participants (Langan and Morton, 2009: 167), enhances the social relevance of research and connects research to larger social change efforts (Giachello et al., 2003). Most importantly PAR starts with “the understanding that people especially, those who have experienced historic oppression hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, and should help shape the questions, [and] frame the interpretations’ of research” (Torre and Fine, 2006, 458, cited in (Cahill, 2007: 329 &330)).

In short, participatory action research methodological framework is developed through a process that is inclusive of research participants as collaborators and knowledge creators “who can inform project design, propose methods, facilitate some of the project activities, and importantly review and evaluate the process as a whole” (Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, and Baldwin, 2012: 12). This echoes the familiar critical standpoint of postcolonial articulated by researchers such as Marjorie Mblinyi and Richa Nagar, that feminist researchers should engage in a conversation with their participants rather than bluntly seek to represent voices that have been marginalised, silenced, or ignored (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). According to Gatenby and Humphries, “both participatory action research (PAR) and feminist research have been developed by researchers aiming for involvement, activism and social critique for the purpose of liberatory change” (2000, 89). Thus, feminist participatory action research is a “conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women’s multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions researchers bring into the research process” (Langan and Morton, 2009: 167).

The Young Women Govern South Africa (YWGSA) project is a feminist project. We believe that feminist participatory action research (FPAR) methodological approach best describes the ethics, politics philosophy informing its methods. At the same time, we have



found it very important to flag disjunctures between the formal definition of “feminist participatory research” and its actual results. Hence, this section critically reflects on the conceptual and (related) participatory action methodological framework used in the practical and research aspects of the Young Women Govern South Africa (YWGSA) project. This methodology, of course, is also reflected in the *research about* this activist project, research that includes quantitative and qualitative reports as well as film representations.

#### 4.2. Action research, Power and Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has become a contested concept in participatory active research projects. According to Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, the contradictory effects of feminist discourses of empowerment “underpinned by poststructuralist theories of power, knowledge and subjectivity” (2003: 58). Too often, scholarship defined as feminist proceeds with the complacent assumption that merely identifying power imbalances, seeming to “empower participants” and producing what is at face value “socially engaged research” is a straightforward and coherent enterprise. Nevertheless, Peters and Marshall stress that discourses of empowerment need to be interrogated with ‘a sense both of its problematical nature and of the political rhetoric it might serve’ (1991:127). Similarly, Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan writes:

Analysis of the complex power relations enacted in participatory action research projects requires a framework that enables researchers to focus on both the micro and macro context, and the multiple subjectivities of those involved. It also requires the use of methods that can enable the critical, reflexive analysis of taken-for-granted assumptions about important feminist and action research concepts such as ‘empowerment’ (2003: 63).

By analyzing and critically reflecting on the research process and activities, one can reduce the “impossible burden’ (Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, 2003: 59) of representing methodological frameworks that engage only with technicalities and methodological tools,

which often masks vulnerability, uncertainties and messiness of the research process.

Our research and the project are open-ended, exploratory and in many ways “incomplete”. While scholarship, even feminist “post-positivist” scholarship, often assumes that open-endedness, exploratoriness and fragmentation indicate “flawed” research, we believe that it is precisely through flaws, gaps and inconsistencies that participatory action research can be enriched and further its aims of social accountability and engagement with socially marginalized participants. We were ever mindful that an absence of reflexivity results in an omission of contradictions, and that it is tempting to tidy the ‘messiness’ of data in order to make research reports ‘hygienic and clean’, ‘thus limiting any analysis of power between researched and researcher’ (Humphries, 1994, p. 201). Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan (2003: 63)

From the beginning, we were aware of the blurring of empowerment and disempowerment. In other words, we accepted that the concept of “empowerment” is ideologically laden, and dependent for its meaning on who defines it and who experiences it. At the same time, as expected, it became increasingly clear that with the magnitude of challenges, dangers and contradictions associated with the gap could ultimately stifle any form of progress.

Stringer argues that “a fundamental premise of community-based action research is that it begins with an interest in the problems of a group, a community or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolve problems that confront them”(1996: 9). Primarily, the need to identify “an issue” was considered an important task for all project participants involved in this YWGSA activist and research initiatives. We did not want to “dump down” (Cahill, 2007: 333) the concept of “civil and political participation in contemporary South Africa” on the young women participants. Nor did we wish to prescribe by prioritizing specific issues, except through providing information about methods to be used and the use of digital technologies for the research project.

In particular, our information focused on encouraging the participants to understand the project as one that enlisted ICTs for feminist ends, rather than as an ICT project focused on

skills acquisition and preparation for the job market. In this regard, we relate to Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, and Baldwin's critical reflection on the difficulty of standardizing participatory active research:

The types of activity conducted as part of an action research activity are difficult to standardize, for three reasons. First, PAR is context-specific and fluid. As issues arise and relationships develop, the methods and activities conducted are necessarily dynamic, requiring adaptation and revision. It is better described than defined. Second, PAR is context-centred; it aims to solve real-life problems. In this way, it is particularly useful for ensuring that research continues to form action in the longer term and for the integration of research into practice and improvement. Third, PAR needs to be widely inclusive of the diversity of experience and capacities amongst participants in the research to capture potential outlier input and ensure acceptance and ownership of both the process and the findings. (Mackenzie, Tan, Hoverman, and Baldwin, 2012: 13)

In order to create interconnection between individuals and groups, it was very important to facilitate weekly informal introductory workshops to take stock of and continually redefine the project – with constant reflections on feminist forms of collective action, consciousness raising and communicational power (Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, 2003). We constantly sought to encourage the young women participants to volunteer and come up with different techniques of team-building activities. The image below shows team-building activities and exercises that were used to break the ice and create communicational skill among the participants. Significantly, the photograph also captures the awkwardness of the location of the researcher and coordinator, at the edges of the process: on one hand, seeming to participate fully, yet at the same time, never fully participating because of their distinctive relation to the process. As researchers, we have learned that this power imbalance should constantly be surfaced, rather than denied. Within the academic space, we were often confronted by the hierarchical and bureaucratic management system. Hence, although “the epistemological framework of a PAR project privileges a ‘bottom-up analysis’, placing emphasis upon the critical insights of the

community collaborators” (Cahill, 2007: 327), we were constantly reminded to critically review our positionality in relation to the project participants and other institution that we are collaborating with. To borrow from Langan and Morton, “our experience speaks to how trying to do politically informed academic work is difficult in ways method and methodology books rarely prepare us for” (2009: 181).



The next step was to identify the “issues” that are significantly affecting young women from marginalized communities, and to seek to ensure that these “issues” were not imposed by us as “experts”. *What are young women’s concerns about their community?* The young women participants were constantly encouraged to identify social problems and methods to collectively address that problem. However, the focus areas identified by young women in the Project were concretely articulated only several months after the project began. The problems that young women face in the Cape Town region were often expressed indirectly, through random comments that filtered into the discussions or through articulating experiences that affected their actual involvement. For example, the repeated lateness and erraticism of many of the non-student participants made it abundantly clear that transport was a major social problem for them. Yet “transport issues” were also crucially linked to

the lack of financial resources, to poor service delivery and infrastructure such as road and to endemic violence, including the omnipresence of crime. There are, in other words, a host of issues that impact on “transport problems”, and identifying transport issues as a salient and over-arching problem is often difficult.

Ultimately, then, the definition of safe transport and the other issues identified for the action-research inevitably involved a form of compromise between action and conceptualization. Attempts were made to avoid taking up the position of “expert” by the “working team”. However, because of the diversity of the group’s “different needs, agendas, and ideologies, and different levels of knowledge and expertise”(Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, 2003: 58), compromises were inevitable to reduce the messiness and complexity of “problems”. Hence, identified issues needed to be “translated” and “tamed” into concepts that could be used for action and research. These are Violence against women (Bodily Integrity), Unemployment, and Transportation.

Groups were formed to create ongoing activism around these identified social problems. Considerable effort was made to articulate the group dynamics as “non-hierarchical” and supportive. Three students, who are also part of the “working group”, from each group were given a task to facilitate and make sure space availability and correspond with the rest of the group members. Since the project is located at the university, this was important as students could easily and regularly communicate with the principal research and/or the research assistant. Often, the original understanding of activism and activist projects as defined in “working group” meetings was redefined and reconceptualized as young women increasingly took ownership of what mattered to them, and in identifying what civic action should and could involve. Most importantly, their articulation of their concerns involved constantly threading through an emphasis on expressive and dialogic communication.



The use of ICTs for feminist activism in South Africa is, of course, far from a new phenomenon. However, the opportunity to allow both the forms and meanings of “activism” to evolve as participants transformed, challenged and contested “received” ideas – often from the Principal Researcher, the research assistant and the co-ordinator, does raise new challenges. These challenges derive from the fact that simply “allowing” young women to pursue their own interests does not solve the problem of “power” or the complexity of developing an authentic feminist project. At the same time, by involving young women from marginalized communities to actively exercise their contradictory creative, intellectual and political agencies, the project included the “excluded”, “silenced” and “ignored” expressions of a largely silenced generation in contemporary South African politics (Cahill, 2007).

Most young women participants in each groups wanted to produce a documentary or a film on the three identified social problems in their community. While this seemed to the researcher to point to a fixation with the glamour of film-making, it also speaks volumes about young women’s desires for visibility in a world where the documentary film offers a powerful route for visibility. In pursuing the young women’s needs for public visibility, we focused on gatherings for exhibiting artwork and performance, the use of “digital activist

messages”, the production of documentaries about YWGSA, photo campaigns, website, facebook page, google+, Youtube, etc. It was from the creative energies of these activities that members of the group developed three political campaign events namely in 2013 – the “I Am ” campaign, the YWGSA website launch, and the “Hear Me Roar” campaign. And photo campaign in 2014 – “I am UWC” and “Is Voting a Right or Duty?” This political activity, while not taking the more orthodox form of petitioning councillors, or engaging with representatives of municipalities, created all-important affirming spaces for the young women’s political expression

### **4.3. PAR and Invented Citizenship**

One of the milestones of the project was the production of our website ActITFem. From the beginning both researchers and the young women were critical of websites created by others for a specific purpose, such as political review sites, without engaging with the end users. In order to reverse the usual situation in which “experts” speak down to “citizens in waiting”, we used bottom-up techniques of soliciting ideas, desires and information to develop the website design. In so doing, we believe that we demonstrated Cahill’s claim that “Self-representation is one of the most significant contributions of the PAR process” (2007: 335). We asked what young women participants would want to see on the website. We had had several workshops characterized by heated discussions as to what should represent our website: for example, “If we are claiming to develop a feminist website, what should and should not be included?” The young women also discussed sites that they frequently surfed on the Internet and shared their knowledge of different sites. Ultimately, the process of designing a website was an extremely slow one. The time taken with this process was important however. It is this time-consuming process – which is often both laborious but also extremely enriching – (vividly reflected in Yvette Abrahams’ work with women in a rural municipality in Cape Town) that is often neglected in NGO, CBO, donor-driven and policy research with marginalized groups.





In most discussions, the content was not as much of a debatable issue as representation, images and design. Many wanted the logo to feature the continent Africa, and for the feminist fist to appear within the map of South Africa. In other words, there was a spirit of pan Africanism in these debates and pride in Africanness. We particularly remember the heated debate on one of the prototypes of the logo, where the website developer used archeological drawings of African people, her intention being to show some ancestral connection. However, some young women critically rejected the drawings, claiming that they perpetuated ethnographic perceptions of “primitive Africa”. Many of these participants were much more in favour of a gritty and robust urban image, which conveyed youthful energy and what seemed to them to be the spirit of feminist ICT activism.

The discussion of the logo therefore raised rich debates around how young women express their identities and wish to see themselves as active citizens in post-apartheid South Africa. Computer chips and computer wires were tried on the feminist fist, and out of the feminist fist energy lines reached out to the rest of Africa. The young women were not convinced by these prototypes. Interestingly, it was often depictions of the geographical nation and continent (which for many seemed tied to authoritarianism) that most participants seemed uncomfortable about.



Finally, it was decided to give the inputs to an artist who would have the intuition to fill-in the gaps and come up with creative drawing. We gave it to Zulfa Abraham's, a PhD candidate in the Women's and Gender Studies department and feminist activist who has a strong connection to many of the participants – both directly and indirectly. She came up with brilliant ideas and five options of drawings. The one that was chosen features a computer chip inscribed on the women's body and the blue colour of her body talks back to the pervasive assumption that computer programming and digital technologies are “for boys”. The text in pink sends a strong political message that young South African women are in charge of defining their identity and belonging through digital technologies. After these powerful discussions, there was no question about feeling anxiety about the colour “pink” as feminized, or obsession with the need for “natural color”. Both participants and researchers felt that the spirit of youthful feminism, rather than femininity, was well-represented in the logo.

This experience showed us how young women often express their subjectivity through visual texts and images. It is often these images that convey a profound sense of why they are in existential and political terms. The website, [www.actifem.co.za](http://www.actifem.co.za), is a showcase for multiple facets of the research project. However, although “the website was designed to be interactive, always changing and growing, and reflective of the producers and the audiences who visit it” (Cahill, 2007: 335), unfortunately so far this was not the case. Based on the in-depth conversation with few young women participants, mostly participants consider the website as an “archive” where they can search for articles. This is perhaps, due to the fact that invited feminist scholars wrote the majority blog essays. This can be seen as a particular example of the gap that continue to exists between theory and practice in participatory forms of feminist research. Hence, we need to acknowledge the unforeseen consequence of website administration that “produce unintended effects, including silencing, exclusion and other forms of disempowerment” (Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, 2003: 58).

### 4.3. Partnerships and Methodological Challenges

The mix of academic interests and commitments with political interests and commitments in a partnership arrangement potentially presents a distressing dilemma, and this contrasts starkly with the widespread enthusiasm about academic/community/state (Langan and Morton, 2009: 181).

Since Women – Gov ICT project is between three countries India, Brazil and South Africa, even though both projects shared a common feminist objective of seeking to empower marginalized women, developing research instruments and deciding what is and what is not likely to work was often debated and needed to be carefully managed. For instance, the South African research team were deeply uncomfortable with quantitative research methods. While this was partly because of weaker expertise in this area, it also stemmed from the realization that for young women especially this tool obscured more than it revealed. For instance, our quantitative tool reveals a number of “contradictions”, with young women often answering questions with responses which they seemed to believe the interviewer wished to hear. It became increasingly evident that quantitative data often require a discourse analysis and reflections on why respondents give the answers that they do under certain conditions. For example, responses to questions such as “How many members are there in your household” (eliciting responses that gave an average of three) reveal many young women’s projections and desires as shaped by hegemonic images of family life, material affluence and strong desires to be “successful”. Secondly, quantitative inquiry limits opportunities to explore, through, for example, participant observation, interviews or focus group discussion, how young women overcome power inequities and exclusions that affect their citizenship rights. Consequently, their responses to questions about their knowledge of rights or local government structures might indicate political apathy and civic disengagement, while other imaginative, dialogic and expressive abilities and desires, often demonstrated differently depending on context would reveal something quite different.

Another complex partnership involved the Project's initial interaction with a community-based organization which, in the early years of democratic transformation played a central role in securing Western Cape women's access to municipality services and social grants. Like many other CBOs and NGOs in postcolonial contexts, however, it has become extremely vulnerable, relying on voluntary or unpaid work by its director and administrator, and often depending on erratic sources of project funding to sustain its demanding work with women in communities. The breakdown of the partnership was therefore symptomatic of a broader economic and socio-political climate. This is characterized by, firstly, declining donor, state and municipal resources for local communities, NGOs and CBOs, and, secondly, neo-liberalism and decreasing state for social development, (leading to decreasing resources and services for poor communities from national and local government). While these factors were anticipated by the Principal Researcher and Research Coordinator at the start of the project, it was not fully understood how significantly this situation would affect the Project.

## **5. Analysis of Findings**

For the purposes of generating comparative research between India, South Africa and Brazil, it has been deemed important to analyse findings in terms of the categories of informational power, communicative power and associative power and collective action. These categories, however, obviously overlap and intersect.

### **5.1 Parameter 1: Informational power**

On the basis of participant observation, interviews and focus group discussion, it has been clear that, to date, the main form of information power acquired by young women students and non-students has involved their growing confidence in becoming interlocutors in local, regional and national affairs. The production of their knowledge here has involved visual material, articles, short blog essays, artwork, and oral input for community TV and national TV stations. We believe that young women have acquired the confidence to produce their own interpretations of current affairs including the reasons for poverty and

unemployment, the scourge of violence against women in South Africa and the limitations of how this scourge has often been written and spoken about in the public domain, and the connection between public transport facilities and the needs and vulnerabilities of women, especially young women.

Weekly training sessions have assisted young women with developing the analytical and political skills to produce this knowledge. At the same time, we are aware that young women (and youth more generally) are often more keen to “do”, than to “think”, defining action as a primary imperative for their work. The plan for the Project in coming months is to consolidate focused research activities and to ensure that a smaller number of capable participants take main responsibility for developing and reviewing information about rights and entitlements. This would also be connected to more proactive efforts to involve policy-makers, planners and government officials in the work that the young women are doing in the one or two planned workshops.

It should be stressed that approximately a year after participants gravitated towards the use of film, including short bits of film, sound and text, (which the coordinator dubbed the digital activism message), this form has acquired renewed interest among NGOs. Replacing the former genre of digital storytelling, which stressed autobiographical and testimonial information, these forms focus on consciousness-raising and encourage viewers to critically reflect and take action. In other words, these forms produce condensed analysis and critical information. We believe that these are the forms of information that have been most successful among our participants.

The short films, digital activism messages, can play a central role in popularising messages as didactic tools - both for NGOs and for public education. Organisations that could use the DVDs include the Sartjie Baartman Centre for Abused Women, Women on Farms and SWEAT, an organisation for sex workers. All these organisations could use DVDs to follow up discussions and explorations of women’s experiences of their bodies in the context of racism, violence and marginalisation.

Regarding women's access to information, and their participation in our local information network, we have established a website, where project participants have been trained to upload relevant material. Information is also shared via facebook. Towards the end of 2013, concerted attention was devoted to publicizing the project to ensure that as wide a group of women as possible could become involved.

While the participants' involvement in the IC4D conference in November 2013 was not strictly speaking a "political" activity, it clearly confirmed the ability of participants and project resources to convey the political value of their ICT strategies and their political ideas among "experts" on ICTs and development in the global south.

## **5.2. Parameter2: Associational power and collective action**

The main strength of the associational power generated by the project has been its success in attracting young women who often experience frustration with top-down and bureaucratic ventures(See D Lewis, T Hussen and M van Vuuren, *Feminist Africa* 18). Young women have participated actively in our on-campus and off-campus activities, with students having been able to recruit participants via facebook and publicizing through cell phones and other electronic media.

Project participants and leaders have been very encouraged by the spirit of solidarity, determination and enthusiasm experienced among the young women. (Evidence of this is provided in the gallery sections on our website).

An ongoing challenge for developing the Project's associational would be to harness young women's activities, such as their use of skits, poetry, photography, installations and talks in forums where government officials and decision-makers can hear them. The associational power of the young women has concentrated on building associations among themselves – clearly an important starting point in any feminist venture, but a process that is also limited and needs to be taken further.

The progressive possibilities of using ICTs and new media in feminist activism needs to be

weighed up against the enmeshing of ICTs with neo-liberalism and commodity capitalism. These relentlessly co-opt resources and messages in the interests of a global capitalist system, For example, the marketing and sale of cell phones, laptops or software in many parts of South Africa, ncluding the most imoverished rural areas, is a stark reminder that these tools are, for many, simply commodities whose sale will increase profits for privileged groups. Even in the most marginalised areas of South Africa, inhabited by those with basic resources in rural and peri-urabn areas, for exaple, cellphone and cellhpne service provider ads abound, this indicating how poor people, women especially are targeted as consumers of, for example, cellphones. How has the use of technology and other commodities at UWC navigated the difficult territory of commodity cpaitalism?

Like many popular progressive initiatives<sup>9</sup>, the Project has given rise to “brand” items – t-shirts, flashdisks, carbumper stickers bearing the slogan “actITfem” and the website logo. These commodity items have been used in ways that destabilizie their origins in consumer capitalism and class hierarchies. They can be displayed as statements of defiance and independence, allowing the those who display them on their bodies or possessions to name themselve in opposition to dominant social messages about what women’s bodies should do and be.

### 5.3. Communicative power

The Project has committed itself to a wide range of media, genres and critical theories of power in order to ensure that young women are able to communicate their political ideas as critically, spontaneously and originally as possible. Although the website is not open to all submissions, we have tended to encourage open participation during certain sections of our pubic activities.

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<sup>9</sup> This would include the use of hoodies, t-shrts, sweat-bands that market lgbti organizations or organizations addressing violence against women.

Our most focused communicative activity revolves around our three themes, themes that are directly relevant to the provision of services to communities at local government level. These are:

1. Access to public transport (see website)
2. Bodily integrity/Violence against women
3. Unemployment

Activities and workshops on these three themes have sought to deal with social issues holistically, so that rather than these being seen as stand-alone issues that can be solved in isolation, they are conceptualised as symptoms of underlying social problems. One facet of our communication here (which has worked very well) has been to communicate messages to other young women, assisting them with finding a focus for problems that may seem overwhelming. A less successful goal to date has been to create an audience among role-players who are responsible for planning and implementing change at the local, provincial and national levels. Although efforts have been made to do this in the past (for example, participants' involvement in debates on community and national television), the consolidation of this audience must be an important priority as the project reaches its end.