



## Reading Resources: Set 2

### Reading 3

Title

**'Gendered Meanings in a Digitally Transformed World'**

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with



**International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**

# Gendered Meanings in a Digitally Transformed World<sup>1</sup>

Anita Gurumurthy. *IT for Change* June 2010.

## Bringing Information Society into Our Analyses at the Court of Women

IT for Change and the Centre for Advocacy and Research worked with Vimochana at the Daughters of Fire - India Court of Women on Dowry and Related Forms of Violence to explore how the questions of gender and violence intertwine in the 'new media' context. Indeed, the past decade has seen a metamorphosing media reality. We are witness to the changing face of 'old' media – print, radio, television – and an emergence of the new digital media space that has ushered in a certain seamlessness across media forms. Indeed, this shift has rendered inadequate our categories for interpreting media through a feminist lens and the basic questions around identity, difference, representation and participation.

And as we brainstormed together, somewhat bravely, on how to bring the elements of the emerging present together into a session, suspecting that a complete coherence may be a difficult task, we still thought it better to lay out the confusions and complexities than not! The task of identifying and naming the emergent media meanings looked a not-so-easy exercise, but the imperative to grasp the predictably elusive analytical frames (like the *vetal* in *Vikramaditya's* legend) of emerging media forms from a feminist perspective we felt was urgent. Therefore, the session on media, we felt, had to explore the terrain of the digital, and locate how the situated experiences of the everyday could be reinterpreted. We also felt it was necessary to examine information society theories – 'new media' analyses in particular – and subject them to an interrogation through southern feminist perspectives.

In a discussion on framing the subject of this essay, my friends Madhu and Kalpana, from Vimochana, eloquently summarised this need to open up the space for reflection and democratise the debate; “unless a more spelt-out understanding informs the theorising about new media which runs the risk of (perpetuating) violence in its own context, it could end up further alienating the invisible and silenced majority from a cyberspace that has enormous potential for appropriation and subversion. However, if at this very infant stage of struggling to understand and appropriate this space, a more rooted theory is not put into place, we will only be helping to collapse this already inaccessible and alienating space into the very amoral and apolitical void it seems to occupy.”<sup>2</sup>

And so the starting point for the deliberations on media and violence was the need to problematise the key issues with respect to changing media trends. Some of our questions were – What is the nature of the mainstream media space now and how do the highly interactive possibilities of new ICTs shape the narratives of transformation? How do we decode the complexities around representation and new media to develop a rigorous and informed critique of the media? What new concepts and categories will enable us to reframe our strategies to address concerns around identity, representation and violence?

Drawing upon the discussions at the Court and our work at IT for Change, this piece attempts to tease out, even if rather tentatively, the relationship between digitally reconstructed spaces and the questions at the heart of the Courts of Women – about globalisation and a post-national contemporary context; the dominant ethic of consumerism; normative and ethical frameworks in the evolving public and the eternal question of collective action.

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1 I am thankful to Shivani Kaul for providing me able research assistance for this essay.

2 Email communication between the author and Vimochana, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

## Violence Against Women – The Emerging Reality of the Virtual

As we encounter technology in what is often called the post-human paradigm, interpreting the complexity of social interactions and imagining feminist alternatives encounters a unique challenge. We are ensconced so deeply within experiences of a transforming world overtaking us with a never-before rapidity that standing back and grasping the concepts and categories explicating our existential coordinates seems like a unending catch-up game. Times of paradigmatic transformation are destabilising. Old categories fail to work and yet we seek comfort in nostalgia refusing to revisit basic precepts connected to power and change, necessary to claim a new politics of resistance.

The imperative to trace the narratives of gender and exploitation in the digitally coded contemporary cannot be overstated. However, we also need to move more than a step beyond identification of new phenomena of violence and exploitation. Our productive intervention in a world where space and time are redefined depends also on evolving feminist analyses and perspectives about the very discourse of the information society, the nature of the beast that we must understand, no doubt to critique its patriarchal discontents but to also coopt its emancipatory content. Our task therefore is two-fold – firstly, to identify patterns of violence against women in and through digital spaces – spaces that are not just online, but also comprising the new, hybrid zones that arise as humanity becomes more and more imbued in technology; and secondly, to then examine information society theory and discourse for the emerging meanings of media, identity and representation for articulating appropriate frameworks of resistance.

The information or 'network' society refers to the historical present being transformed unequivocally by the Internet and other digital technologies. The Internet can no longer be seen as just a technology – it is a platform for most global information and communication exchanges underpinning a new social paradigm. Telephony, TV, radio, and even 'print' media, are converging onto this one platform. Google is the world's new library, Facebook the world's meeting place, Youtube, the final media frontier. The Internet is also not just the backbone of global communications today; it is the alchemist giving new forms to social relationships. The very architecture of social institutions and systems is undergoing a quantum shift because of the Internet. These changes pertain to interpersonal and social relationships (like the ramifications we see with respect to the institution of marriage in trends such as online matrimonial sites, the phenomenon of 'mail order brides' etc.) as much as to production systems, work flows and business. Access to the Internet is being seen as a basic right in many countries, reflecting the far-reaching implications it has had on social organisation.

Indeed, as social order seems to mutate through the almost self-propelling pervasion of new information and communications technologies, the context of violence against women has changed and presents a confounding complexity. But of course, even as new manifestations and patterns emerge, the underlying issues are the same – the substrate of power and inequality, as research on violence against women and new technologies reveals:

- Mobile phones and the Internet are used to contact and 'promote' girls and women involved in sex tourism and prostitution in general. These technologies are used to specify preferences, conditions, dates and times, etc., with women and girls being bought and sold like merchandise. ICTs are also used to contact intermediaries or “pimps” who use social networking sites (for example, Facebook) to post and sometimes sell photographs. With regard to human trafficking, women and girls are usually lured with false offers made

directly or through communications tools like the Internet. These offers include opportunities to work or study in foreign lands, and even romantic personal relationships<sup>3</sup>.

- In Asia, despite the high prevalence of mobile phone use, in some countries, women do not have access and men retain control over the phone. Across the region, mobile phones are used to harass and stalk women and to distribute videos taken for private purposes<sup>4</sup>. Privacy invasion through SMS stalking and monitoring and control by spouses is also noted as being on the rise. Men control women's use of mobile phones and give or withhold permission to their wives to use them, when and how. The link between mobile phones and killing of women are not incidents in isolation<sup>5</sup>.
- The ease of access, relatively low cost and good technical quality of online digital content, as well as the privacy it arguably facilitates for users, makes the Internet an attractive vehicle for marketing pornography. Peer-to-peer networks, even as they are spaces for subversion and social mobilisation allowing users to circumvent the controls characteristic of the centralised systems of network society, are also very attractive to perpetrators of sexual exploitation of women<sup>6</sup>. The immensely popular video games culture also perpetuates the overwhelming dominance of the hegemonic masculine discourse of mainstream media which normalises the representation of women as passive, sexual objects. Markedly, huge corporations with strong financial backing own most of the pornographic sites.<sup>7</sup>

The new manifestations we see in the cartographies of exploitation and violence signal a troubling impasse; the inefficacy of 'older' feminist analyses to inform counter-hegemonic feminist action. At the same time, the policy context in many developing countries is far behind techno-social innovation, and even where policies do exist, they are extremely inadequate in ensuring the protection of women's rights and enabling women's claims to the new social paradigm and its liberatory potential.

One of the greatest contradictions of virtual reality is that it promises the marvels and wonders of a gender-free world while simultaneously reproducing some of the most banal, flat images of gender identity, as also class and race relations, typical of the pornographic regime of representation<sup>8</sup>. These trends pose almost irreconcilable dilemmas for feminism. Unfortunately, women's organisations and movements have not been actively engaged in articulating progressive directions for law and policy in the digital environment. Appealing to the state to regulate private interests and their control over

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3 Davidziuk, María Isabel and Davidziuk, María Alejandra (2009): "Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia: Cross-country Study on Violence against Women and Information Communication Technologies". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=96382>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

4 Randhawa, Sonia (2010): "Cambodia, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines: Cross-country Study on Violence against Women and Information Communication Technologies". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=96380>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

5 Madanda, Aramanzan, Ngolobe, Berna and Zavuga Amuriat, Goretta (2009): "Uganda: Violence against Women and Information Communication Technologies". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=96273>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

6 Hughes, Donna M. (2002): "The Use of New Communication and Information Technologies for the Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children". *Hastings Women Law Journal*. *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=95143>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

7 Kee, Jac S M (2005): "Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the Connections between Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) and Violence Against Women (VAW)". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=91306>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

8 Braidotti, Rosi (1996): "Cyberfeminism with a difference." *New Formations*. No. 29: 9-25. Reprinted in: *Zones of Disturbance*. Ed. Silvia Eiblmayer. (Steirischer herbst 1997): 112-120. Available on [http://www.let.uu.nl/womens\\_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm](http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm), accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

digital spaces is also not unproblematic, given that state surveillance and censorship through digital technologies is in itself a real threat to women's rights.

And yet, in the absence of appropriate regulation and gender responsive policies as well as the inability of women's movements and organisations to formulate recommendations, any action for progressive change seems to be rather ad-hoc. Invariably, any such action looks diminutive against the huge challenge of corporatist consolidation of digital spaces and state collusion with corporate power, as well as the blatant gender-blindness of largely technocratic state policy in the information society context. In official policy, the casting of digital technologies as vehicles of economic growth profoundly implicates state imaginaries of power and nation-building and gender justice gets conveniently relegated to pave the way for private global capital<sup>9</sup>. It is not accidental that despite governmental and law enforcement responses to the distribution of child pornography, and child stalking in some countries, the sexual exploitation of adult women through new technologies is an issue that governments avoid.

What we see as the emerging patterns of violence in digital spaces requires to be explored more closely for the power relations underpinning the information society logic. Delving into the content of information society categories is the first step to be able to discern the patterns emerging as we join the dots marking the global everyday against the digital backdrop.

### New Configurations of Power in the Space of Flows

The fundamental reconfigurations of society through digital technologies and changing trends in media - the transition from 'traditional' media to a new composite media architecture – that underline virtuality as a dominant ingredient, in fact denote new discourses around identity and representation. In the new media architecture that is convergent, there is a shift in the very nature of media – from a tool that mediates and represents to the virtual space that fractures truth through multiple representations of the truth narrative (that traditional print media for instance did not allow). Multiplicity now is thus part of our shared new digital-age 'reality'.

The Internet and other digital media, including mobile phones, are not just transmitters of cultures, but they denote spaces configuring new and hybrid cultures that blend the virtual and the real. Information society ontologies enable oppressed and marginalised groups to disrupt and challenge the tyrannies of social structures; equally, the digital environment further entrenches dominant ideologies of power. Manuel Castells in his work on the 'network society'<sup>10</sup> talks about the 'space of flows'<sup>11</sup>, the new geographies shaped by digital technologies, that restructure power relations through informational flows and practices of the everyday. Thankfully however, the values of competition in the digital ecology are in constant tussle with those of cooperation that subvert the dominant logic to harness the power of the network for collaboration, mobilisation and social organising<sup>12</sup>.

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9 Kee, Jac sm and Randhawa, Sonia (2009): "Malaysia: Violence against Women and Information Communication Technologies". APC Women's Networking Support Programme. *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r9050190518e96277-1>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

10 Castells, Manuel (1996, second edition, 2000). "The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture" Vol. I. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

11 Ibid

12 Benkler, Yochai (2006). "The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom". New Haven. Yale University Press, and Fuchs, Christian (2008). "Internet and Society. Social Theory in the Information Age". New York: Routledge. Routledge

Although the Internet was originally born in publicly funded labs in the US, and was not intended as a business infrastructure, the Clinton administration, rechristening it as the 'global information infrastructure', sought to claim it foremost as a tool for global business and commerce<sup>13</sup>. In its entanglement with economic globalisation, the Internet has transmuted and its open, egalitarian character stands threatened. Computer networks are the technological foundation of what is often referred to as global network capitalism today, fuelling the accumulation of economic, political, and cultural capital. In fact, corporate and political domination today are mediated by cyberspace as a tool of global coordination and communication. Let us look at facts. Five years ago, Internet traffic was, for the most part, managed by tier 1 providers like AT&T, Verizon, Level 3 Communications and Global Crossing, all of which connected to thousands of tier 2 networks and regional providers. Today this has changed. Now, instead of traffic being distributed among tens of thousands of networks, only 150 networks control some 50% of all online traffic<sup>14</sup>. And the trend clearly is towards greater consolidation.

Horizontal, peer-to-peer communication on the Internet – the bed-rock of many contemporary trans-local movements and solidarities (discussed earlier as also being a space for pornography!) – is being intimidated in various ways at present, often through targetting by big corporations under the guise of copyright violation. Whether in peer-to-peer wireless connectivity or exchange of information or content, or social networking, both corporates and governments prefer intermediation through closely guarded gatekeeping; corporates for rent-seeking and 'encashing' intellectual property rights, and governments for the relative ease of 'watching' citizens. Yet, network capitalism itself brazenly instrumentalises cooperation in the digital ecology to consolidate corporatist hegemony. Through a culture of 'gifts' and 'free' access and in the name of community (a rhetoric that is coopted by Facebook for instance) and free speech (Google's operational strategy uses the rhetoric of free speech and access to information), mega corporations in the Internet economy reinforce hyper-individualism, promoting competition and commodification of knowledge in order to achieve a high number of users, which allows them to charge high advertisement rates and drive up profits. The captive community of these users, with deep access to, and even control over, their behaviour, represents the new digital era gold mines.

Reclaiming epistemic lenses that ensure we are not carried away by the distracting fluidity of the technological everyday, requires that we both stand by the side of those who may not yet be within the charmed circle of techno-social existence - but whose lives all the same are enmeshed in the systemic chaos unleashed by the emerging information society, as well as, interrogate the conditions of inclusion of those who may have been admitted into its peripheries. While state control and censorship are issues that we understand with impassioned ease, corporate control in the digital space is not debated as much in the global south. The rhetoric of the digital divide and telecom market liberalisation has crowded out development and rights oriented discourses around new technologies, making way on the contrary, for rent seeking by powerful global corporations by occupying public spaces and provisioning public goods and in the digital ecology. While many of us are aware of Microsoft and its monopolistic and anticompetitive practices in the software market, Google's project to digitalise the world's books and its expropriation of community labour for Googlemaps are developments in the digital frontiers that signal a new 'tragedy of the commons'<sup>15</sup>,

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13 Wikipedia (2010). "Global Information Infrastructure". Available online

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_Information\\_Infrastructure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Information_Infrastructure), accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

14 Perez, Sarah (2009): "Google Accounts for 6% of All Internet Traffic". Read Write Web. Available online

[http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/google\\_accounts\\_for\\_6\\_of\\_all\\_internet\\_traffic.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/google_accounts_for_6_of_all_internet_traffic.php), accessed on 24 Jun 2010.

15 Hardin, Garrett (1968): "The Tragedy of the Commons", *Science*, Vol. 162, No. 3859 (December 13, 1968), pp. 1243-1248. Available online [http://www.garrethardinsociety.org/articles/art\\_tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons.html](http://www.garrethardinsociety.org/articles/art_tragedy_of_the_commons.html),

the emergence of a public sphere that is controlled by private interests.

### Real(ity) Media and Unreal Gender

Critical to feminist analyses is the task of grasping how the politics of subjectivity is constructed in the wider digital ecology, in the emerging dialectic between the technological and social. Mirroring in some way the structure-agency dialectic, this interrogation is about how identity and action can be understood in the here and now. Contemporary society marks the end of the space-time construction, with a blurring of the semantic distinctions between self and other, producing a certain crisis of categories. (Take reality TV for instance or the case of 'avatars' in online platforms).

In the subjectivities of the digital space, new freedoms abound; yet, the personhood that evolves with increased digitalization of our daily lives throws up complexities around representation, rendering old feminist theories around objectification inadequate. As visual media have increasingly become the predominant mode of communication, a pervasive means shaping self-perception in contemporary society, we witness what Rosalind Gill describes as the emergence of the figure of the autonomous, active, desiring female subject<sup>16</sup>. This sexualised representation of young women in new media, in their sexual subjectification, has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise. Lest we construe this as the advent of the assertive liberated subject of the feminist imaginary, Gill urges a deeper examination, noting the problem of the exclusions of this representational practice, the fact that only some attractive women are constructed as active desiring sexual subjects and of the invocation in such simplistic post-feminist discourse of the notion of 'active choice' that glosses over structural inequalities and power imbalances.

The profound shifts in the narratives of subjectivity and representation makes feminist critique much more difficult in contemporary times. These shifts mark the hyper-individualism perpetuated by the dominant forces in the wider institutional and ideological ecologies of the digital environment. Attesting to a new version of 'emancipation' – that of the neoliberal, female subject – digital space offers women the 'choice' to become sex objects because this suits their 'liberated' interests.

The discursive drift in relation to sexuality and subjectivity in digital space no doubt complicates the question of women's empowerment and gender justice – it begs the question how do we frame collective ontologies and theorise around the experiences of marginalised women?

In Habermasian theory, the public sphere was seen as a space to generate public opinion with moral-political validity where empowered citizenry would influence the sovereign state. The global public sphere today, dramatically altered as it is by digital technologies, presents deep challenges around questions of social justice. Communicative arenas today constitute deterritorialised space, not corresponding to sovereign states or political citizenry. The addressee of communications is a curious mix of public and private transnational powers<sup>17</sup>. In this global communications arena, the proliferation of overlapping visual cultures and the consolidation of corporate media power

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accessed on 24 Jun 2010. The term is used to explain the situation of multiple individuals, acting independently, consulting their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource even when it is clear that it is not in anyone's long-term interest for this to happen (Wikipedia 2010: "Tragedy of the commons". Available online [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons), accessed on 24 Jun 2010).

16 Gill, Rosalind (2003): "From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: The resexualisation of women's bodies in the media". *Feminist Media Studies*. Re-Public. Available online <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=163>, accessed on 24 Jun 2010.

17 Fraser, Nancy (2005): "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere". Republicart. Available online [http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.htm), accessed on 24 Jun 2010.

underpins the naturalisation of multiple 'others' and the deployment of difference for the sake of profit<sup>18</sup>. Different cultures and races and classes and genders are welcome so long as they may be repackaged for profit. While contemporary media architecture does challenge the idea of a single truth narrative, this may not mean we are necessarily closer to the truth. Take Reality TV for instance; the fact that more of us can be 'out there' with our 'realities' hardly adds up to any discourse around social transformation.

The enlisting of difference thus for capitalist profit depoliticises the discursive arena of gender. Paradoxically, the multiplicity of representations we encounter in digital space is replete with gender stereotypes. Misogynistic trends continue to persist, the pervasiveness and extreme violence of Internet pornography being a case in point. Online spaces (never mind their promise for liberation from disempowering identities) are the new bastion of patriarchal norms, constructing and perpetuating content for male consumption through 'real virtuality' – from avatars to games – that package female bodies and kinky sex, wrapping them in banal representations of patriarchy, race, class and age. In the emerging dominant visual cultures, multiple versions of homogenised, depoliticised, iconic feminism abound. While post-modernity ushered in the permeation of pornography in every sphere of cultural activity, the digital public sphere as the bastion of new cultures moves the boundaries of sexist domination. As more and more cultural activity migrates to the hybrid spaces co-constituted by the digital, the commodification of female subjectivity is bound to be co-terminus with the new expressions of exclusion, control and violence in and through digital space.

In the Web 2.0 context, capitalist logic of the commodification of human subjectivity and productive capacity for profit acquires a new twist. Witness the rise of the 'prosumer' (producer-consumer) or the 'produser' (producer-user)<sup>19</sup>, in what is touted to be a form of online citizenship. How do we contextualise participation and membership in online spaces? Facebook 'opened up' its governance to users last year announcing user voting on a 'Facebook Principles and Statement of Rights and Responsibilities' document. Behind this veneer of rights-bearing citizenship online is the undemocratic unilateralism of corporates in the digital space whose decisions follow the impulse of profit; private information about users, apart from being commercially exploited, is regularly shared by companies with state authorities, in violation of the rights of individual users.

As states respond to 'digital chaos' with patriarchal alarmism and protectionism, gender politics seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place. Unregulated norm-setting by private corporate interests in the digital space poses one more challenge; the increasing gate-keeping of information and knowledge by corporates in the digital space, including closed and undemocratic mechanisms of information and knowledge validation that undermine multiple ways of knowing and expropriate the knowledge of the subaltern. As much as the dominant digital paradigm constructs the material reality of the communications arena, it also wields enormous definitional power.

As the social networking era is seen to mark the advent of the feminisation of the web, the current configurations of the Web 2.0 space have heralded new versions of a marketised public sphere characterised by the commodification of subjectivity. But, antithetical to conventional democratic notions of the public sphere, the global digital public lacks the means to crystallise public opinion based on public interest filtered through fair, inclusive and critical social argumentation. Neither the multiplicity of voices nor the act of being present in the global digital public therefore imply the requisite ingredients of a democratic, political agora. In the absence of appropriate 'global'

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18 Braidotti, Rosi (2006): "Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics". Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press.

19 Fuchs, Christian (2008). "Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age". Routledge, New York.

institutional arrangements that can restrain corporate power and enable agency and representativity, 'voicing' and 'presence' in the emerging digital environment signify the banality of debate and politics, failing to generate a citizenry that is empowered or public opinion that is legitimate.

Thus the wider institutional setting of the information society presents a huge void – a moral-political deficit that displaces the normative and delegitimises the collective, rendering claims-making untenable. Despite new community constellations in the transnational order, the absence of normative and justiciable political institutional frameworks prevents counter-powers resisting marginalisation from being represented and included in a public sphere that is democratic and accountable. Also, from a feminist perspective, as the homogenising global public sphere is being further strengthened, the multiple counter publics are increasingly becoming now 'public spheres of choice', aligning along class, ethnic, gender and such boundaries, causing a narrow inbreeding social discourse and deeper exclusions that strike at the very root of political deliberation and a negotiation around differences across social categories. Participants in this emerging public seem to be 'captives' of the subjectivity of their own personal experience, which remains private even if it is multiplied. Gender justice is one more agenda that vies for space in the attention economy; caught between stereotypical representations that reinforce and recreate patriarchal power and the multitude of fragmented and often invisible and delegitimised narratives of agency and struggle, the task of claiming gender equality as an emancipatory ideal gets complicated and elusive.

#### Finding our feet in the Space of Flows - Towards a new Framework of Resistance

Where does this leave feminist intervention today? Does the information society, despite trivialisation of the political-normative, hold potential for resistance and transformation? Theories of the information society, as was mentioned earlier, do point to the intrinsic tensions of the digital environment – the tug of war between its democratic and totalising propensities. As Fuchs remarks almost philosophically, "It seems that a cooperative society has never been more realistic in an objective sense but has never been more unrealistic in a subjective sense. The networking of the world advances the idea of bottom-up, grassroots self-organization and of a participatory society. However, ...under the given conditions, humans are confronted with a colonization of ever more spheres of society to an ever-larger extent by economic reason and the competitive logic of accumulation."<sup>20</sup>

How then do we recuperate the democratic content of digital spaces for claims-making by marginalised women? In our imaginations of the alternative, how should our conceptual lenses be framed so that we avoid the easy plunge into post-feminist romanticism and post-modernist anarchy? In the subversive potential of the information society, contained in the versatility and pliability of the technologies defining our times, we must of course repose our faith. As Jac Kee argues, the digital environment "enables alternative discourses "rendering visible codes of desire that are usually silenced in dominant discourses on sexualities... allowing women ...to openly express themselves on a subject that is usually obscured under various disempowering labels (e.g. 'shame', 'loose morals', 'slut' etc.), (providing) crucial social or political spaces for LGBTQ women to connect, particularly when physical spaces are heavily policed."<sup>21</sup> However, unless such alternative discourses are claimed for, and channelled into, collective political action, they run the risk of disappearing into the abyss of digital expansiveness. The chimera of action may be worse than no action, suppressing possibilities of real transformation.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 353.

<sup>21</sup> Kee, Jac S M (2005): "Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the Connections between Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) and Violence Against Women (VAW)". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=91306>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.

Castells, in his conception and characterisation of the network society as a 'space of flows' was concerned not only with the dominant spatial manifestation of power in the emerging architecture of society, but also with the micro-macro connections. He therefore also saw the space of flows as made up of micro-networks interacting with macro-networks. More recently, information society theory has been considerably engaged with the commons based peer production that the network society enables, through values of collaboration that challenge neo-liberal narratives of the digital environment. The idea of the network society thus makes it possible to visualise cooperation as a countervailing force embedded in the techno-social environment. Network society theories have themselves been on an evolutionary path; while early Castellian depictions of the hub and spoke articulated a certain structural organisation of power, more recent visualisations – like the 'gel' metaphor<sup>22</sup> and notions like the 'mobile society'<sup>23</sup> – move away from the core-periphery idea, capturing the fluidities of power in the global network and spatial transformation through mobility and self-organising. Beyond the dualities of competition and cooperation, material production and social organization, capitalist economy and gift economy etc, it may be productive to see the dialectic between society and technology as generating ambiguous spaces where the experience of such opposing categories can be seen as coterminous, and providing spaces for claims-making by progressive forces.

It would then be possible not only to interpret the 'global as multilayered'<sup>24</sup>, as Saskia Sassen describes it, but also to reterritorialise the local as a discursive space with opportunities for new inclusions and for resistance. Re-articulating gender justice agenda in the multi-layered global calls for a creative and tactical multi-layered politics – creating new representations of men and women, forging solidarities of trust, and coopting the ambiguities of the digital space for institutionalising new citizenship practices. Of course, such cultures of resistance are already pervasive in digital space.

However, the central problematic for gender justice involves the reinventing of the institution of citizenship in the current conjuncture. The information society has undoubtedly pushed the aspirational and normative boundaries of citizenship, giving voice and presence to the marginalised and generating tensions in rights regimes nationally and globally. The critical question now is about the appropriate institutional arrangements in global and national governance commensurate with the changing practices and conception of citizenship that allows women as 'global' citizens to invoke rights and to also make claims against the tyranny of, and to constrain, the power of dominant global actors vis-a-vis the nation state.

Indeed, state policy is a key lever of progressive change, especially since the dream of a global polity howsoever theoretically valid, is still a dream. The gender justice question here hinges on the reconstruction of the political agora. Fears about gender transgressions in these times of flux invariably constrain local publics that allow women to find new spaces whereas appropriate policies and regulation can play a decisive role in ensuring that 'women's' concerns become part of 'public' discourse. The nurturance of a heterogeneous public sphere in which the threat of fragmentation inherent to the digitally mediated publics can be addressed through appropriate policies including subsidies for meaningful content production as well as public interest content consumption. Our

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22 Sheller, Mimi (2004): 'Mobile Publics: Decoupling, Contingency, and the Local/Global Gel', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22, pp39-54. Also at <http://www.its.leeds.ac.uk/projects/mobilenetwork/downloads/Mobilepublics.doc>

23 Castells, Manuel et al. (2007): "Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective". Cambridge: MIT Press.

24 Sassen, Saskia (2006): "Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages". Princeton: University Press

analyses and articulations require to balance with sophistication the various rights and freedoms in order to address emerging violations in and through the digital space, the absence of debate around questions about ownership of content, the obligations of Internet Service Providers and website owners, and the role of the government. The non-negotiability of women's citizenship rights needs to inform how we work through the inherent tensions between the right to privacy and freedom of expression; the right to public information access/ right to know versus the right to privacy; and the right to privacy versus the right to security, as we rearticulate women's rights in the global and local publics. It is also imperative to have policy interventions, from global to local levels, for creating public information and communications goods, like local language wikis and search engines based on public interest oriented information architecture.

The governance of the Internet itself is another vital policy domain, requiring feminist intervention. The architecture of an equitable and gender just digital arena cannot build only on the promise of an open, bottom-up and participatory, global Internet, but demands appropriate positive global policy action for creating, nurturing and preserving a global public information and communication infrastructure. In order to promote the Internet as a possible counter force for protecting diversity and citizenship rights, not only is regulation needed to address anti-competitive, monopolistic practices and to thus ensure the equality and neutrality/ openness of the Internet, but also to proactively deepen the public domain in digital spaces. Feminist activism cannot afford any longer to turn a blind eye to the very real threat inherent in the homogenisation of cultures and peoples that comes with the Internet in its pervasiveness.

Finally, feminist re-symbolizations of the network society and the space of flows can only be born through women's appropriation and rearticulation of digital spaces. As always, there is no alternative to the politics of doing; and indeed to the conversations between doing and learning. Our strategies depend only in part on how ICTs are used 'to communicate'; the goal is to appropriate the information society to complete the grand feminist project of democracy, which requires new political constituencies of women to emerge in and through the new spaces. The idea, as María Isabel Davidziuk and María Alejandra Davidziuk argue, is not merely to take advantage of technological "hypercommunication", multimedia tools and the ability to actively create content. We also need to recognise and strengthen the empowering ties generated by networks of women's organisations and other groups working to break down the walls of the cells in which almost 70% of the world's people are currently imprisoned."<sup>25</sup>

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25 Davidziuk, María Isabel and Davidziuk, María Alejandra (2009): "Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Colombia: Cross-country Study on Violence against Women and Information Communication Technologies". *Gender IT.org*. Available online <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=96382>, accessed on 23 Jun 2010.