

SESSION II: Women's citizenship in the information society – Mapping the contemporary context

This session aimed to capture the big picture – the democratic transition characterising the information society, and key elements that shape marginalised women's citizenship in this regard. It explored the emergent norms and practices of social and political citizenship in the 'network society', exploring their gendered articulations.

Chair: John Borgoyary, UNIFEM South Asia, India

1. Emerging insights from the work of the CITIGEN programme – Anita Gurusurthy, IT for Change and Coordinator, CITIGEN programme, India

The presentation was a synthesis of the Stories of Change and the think pieces generated by the CITIGEN research programme. Gurusurthy began by noting that the researches seemed to suggest the emergence of the building blocks of a new social architecture that could possibly disrupt traditional gender roles.

She continued to say that noted shifts were taking place in terms of three realignments to power. First, in the form of informational power, as evidenced by the example of the Bangladeshi info-ladies, who have access to the symbolic power associated with digital tools. There is also a realignment taking place in terms of associational power – as in the case of the Thai migrant domestic workers or the elected women representatives of the Indian project. The information society has enabled negotiation of constraints of space and time; this is leading to a constitutive associational power. Women are able to come together to explore what it means to be a political entity. Finally, there is also the communicative power afforded by the information society – this was evident in the interviews from China and Taiwan. Margarita Salas' think piece also serves as an example of this communicative power – it indicates the way in which the Internet enabled a coming together of NGOs and civil society players to oppose the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

Focussing on the big picture in terms of insights from the programme, Gurusurthy noted that the programme seems to be 'building a field'. The research projects are pushing boundaries of

theory, suggesting new pathways for practice, as well as generating questions for policy. Based on the Stories of Change presented in the first session, Gurusurthy observed that even though the new notions of the 'digital' do reconfigure ideas of gender, this does not necessarily always link to a shift in ideas of citizenship. The new digital spaces created by the information society may take us closer to emancipation, but the nature of this emancipation must be examined.

In this light, four distinct elements from the CITIGEN programme were brought up. First, Farida Shaheed's think piece makes the point that

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unless meso-level institutions, like policing of cultural norms by the gatekeepers in the community is dealt with, citizenship as promised by the information society will not be effectively accessible. Second, questions of the nature and ethics of feminist research as exemplified by the Philippines project have to be discussed: the contexts of historical time and trajectory created by previous feminist scholars must be engaged with. The CITIGEN projects – e.g. in a gay person blogging about his right to parenting - seem to embody specific localities that are not normally heard of in the grander scheme of ICTD, amidst statements such as 'ICTs empower'. Thirdly, the

migrant domestic worker project exemplifies the legitimacy of an aspiration to citizenship; however, the access to the information society depends heavily on state policy. Finally, women activists also seem to put up with patriarchal bargains: this suggests a resurgence of older methods in feminist activism – dissent, campaigns, subversion – which are recast in the light of the information society.

Borrowing from mathematical theory, Gurumurthy explained that small networks, as opposed to big networks, are networks with several interconnected nodes, in a way that if one node is disturbed, the entire network does not collapse. The CITIGEN projects seem to embody the first steps towards these heterarchical or non-hierarchical networks that defy the big network logic of the information society. Further, Gurumurthy used the game theory to describe the mass discontent in dictatorial regimes. As everyone knows that everyone knows that something is wrong, there is a hope for a historical shift and ICTs seem to be poised delicately in enabling that space.

In terms of implications for practice, Gurumurthy suggested that researchers question the idea and

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meaning of feminist digital literacy. Given that the fundamental premise of citizenship is that one knows 'how' to be political (i.e. one has the tools and vocabulary required), it is important to ask whether feminist digital literacy involves merely imbibing the tools that the market determines we should have. Another issue to be

2. Responses and Perspectives – Hania Sholkamy, Associate Professor, American University in Cairo, Egypt

Speaking conceptually from what she had heard on the first day, Sholkamy organised her

negotiated is that of intermediarity and the changing role of women's organisations in the information society. Using older methods to deal with these relationships bears the risk of activities, such as blogging, becoming centralised and elitist. At the same time, there is still a need to broker feminist practice. Gurumurthy said that the next step was to stitch together the fragments of the information society; move from being mobs to movements, transforming collectivities to networks. For example, communities on Facebook may seem like an empowering tool, but a closer examination reveals that the subjectivities constructed there are neo-liberal and capitalist.

Going on to contextualise findings for policy, Gurumurthy asserted that the dialogue on the feminist intergenerational divide is an important one to have. Margarita Salas' think piece throws up the extent of the divide between digital immigrants and natives in Central America in terms of perceiving and interrogating issues.

Invariably, questions of the market will remain eternal for feminists. Social networking sites may serve as platforms for communication and association but the link to the market is embedded in that question, as e.g. the Facebook terms include a clause that states the accessibility of our private information to the market. The mobiles we use in our projects often come locked-in with certain applications. We need to examine whether we are providing a front door entry for neo-liberal globalisation.

Gurumurthy ended by saying how essential a gendered perspective of the commons is, as indeed, what is free and open is not necessarily inclusive and participatory. The challenges ahead is to go beyond current institutional regimes to create innovative institutions that can address challenges and dilemmas in the information society.

Hania Sholkamy, Associate Professor, American University in Cairo, Egypt

observations into three sections: what she had gleaned from the conversation so far, Internet



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activism and the recent Egyptian revolution, and finally, the challenges and insecurities thrown up in terms of what is happening for feminist subjectivities and knowledge production.

Looking back at the discussions taking place, she

felt she had sensed three sets of dualities and tensions: between information understood as commons and information understood as commodity; between continuity and change, as technological innovations can reproduce inequalities, and therefore have to be critically examined; and between representation and participation, as being present in a network is different from creating or changing it. She listed the characteristics of ICTs that are seen as empowering: their utility, their affordability, throwing up possibilities for creativity, and finally, an un-gendered equality offered by the technologies. In these ways, these particular technologies are an affront to segregation, isolation, etc. Projects are utilising enabling technologies for women to access rights and benefits.

Moving on to observations on the Egyptian revolution earlier this year, Sholkamy pointed out that the revolution does throw up worries and concerns with hope. While acknowledging that the electronic hinterland of Tahrir Square was densely populated with photos, tweets, quotes, etc., Sholkamy shared that the people's

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movement only came to maturity in the hinterland; it was not created there. It was because the regime had cut off mobiles and Internet access that people went to the street as

there were no other modes of communication. The synergy between the virtual and the real, between electronic and face-to-face communication, created the revolution. Reflecting on the role of gender in the revolution, she noted that female bloggers, who were among the first ones to call for demonstrations, provoked men to follow them by demanding their protection in the streets, thereby using their femininity to make them behave more manly.

Summing up the role of technology in the revolution, Sholkamy said that technology enabled collectives and possibilities of alliance; it

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enabled people to know that something was wrong, enabled them to feel angry; and it enabled them to demand change. As such, ICTs played an important facilitating role. It helped creating a moment in Tahrir Square where differences were momentarily suspended and everyone was equal. However, post that moment, that spirit dissipated. Sholkamy, as a member of the group 'Women for Democratic Change in Egypt', shared that even though the group played an active part in the revolution, it has since then been unable to influence the political process taking place.

Sholkamy summed up by noting that the practical uses of ICTs are democratising, but the political uses can often mirror existing socio-political inequalities and relations. The CITIGEN researches must retain a balancing act between the virtual and the real in negotiating their projects. Addressing the issue of the intergenerational divide, Sholkamy said that we should think of the politics of development not only in terms of activism and protest, but in terms of viewing citizenship as public goods. She

concluded by saying that feminist practice and

possibilities are enhanced by ICTs, but there are glass ceilings that must be examined carefully.

3. Responses and Perspectives – Mary John, Director, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, India

Mary John began by asking what the new era of technology, as ICTs were being hailed, would bring to the politics of people who are interested in movements as harbingers of change. She picked two examples from the history of feminism and women's struggle which were prominent in bringing about a new phase of politics. She first mentioned the 19th century suffragettes, who in a period of imperialism where women were not seen fit to be citizens, started organising through signature campaigns and demonstrations and became inspirations for us all. The second example she took was from the long march in China (1934-1935), when the red army went to rural areas and politicised the women there. Among other methods, they put in place 'speak bitterness' groups where women would come together and speak about their daily oppressions, helping supposed mundane suffering to find expression and language. These two initiatives are examples of two political frames, one of large public action and the other, of smaller secluded space, both needed by women.

Nowadays, the feminist movement is getting increasingly institutionalised with greater

involvement with the state. Politics has shifted to organisational spaces of NGOs, there has been a professionalisation and an academisation of feminist politics. In such a scenario, she asked, how ICTs could be transformative.

Living in a neo-liberal capitalist world which is enabled through media technology, we must take cognisance of both the mesmerising value of these technologies, and the risk they bear in taking some of us away from the political. She mentioned that in that sense, it is important to think through the politics of the present. She also added that, even though feminists have usually seen technologies as disadvantageous for women (e.g. when better technology enables child sex determination, and therefore, female foeticide), ICTs do not adhere to this presumption, but the ways in which they can be good for feminism still needs to be clarified.



Mary John