

## SESSION III: Democracy and women's participation – ICT-mediated processes for making institutions work for women

This session aimed to explore the promise of institutional reach and transparency through ICTs, and thus of the emerging pathways for accountable governance on the one hand, and of active citizen engagement by women with local governance and political processes, on the other. What kind of trends may be discerned in the shifting practices and discourse of local democracy? What are the tensions that may arise with regard to 'boundary' issues in state-civil society relationships as ICTs shape governance? These were some of the questions addressed.

Chair: Sumona Dasgupta, Senior Research Consultant, PRIA, India

### 1. Bangladeshi team presentation – Ananya Raihan, Executive Director, Development Research Network (D.Net), Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi team began its response to the topic of the session by referring to the tension of representation versus participation mentioned by Sholkamy in the morning session. Raihan cited an example of the programme of the Bangladeshi government targeting marginalised women through the distribution of allowances. The women identified by political representatives were often not the ones who needed it the most. In order to address this issue, a pilot project was undertaken in a village where women came together to determine the appropriate beneficiaries, which they did, reflecting that political representatives did not always represent the peoples views.

Taking the participants through the democratic and political scenario and women's representation in Bangladesh, the presentation observed that the Right to Information act, in place since 2009, has allowed women to get information about their entitlements. There are thirty seats reserved for women in the assembly. However, these are selected by elected representatives, not through direct reservation. At the current time, many major portfolios in the government are held by women, which is an encouraging sign, even though male counterparts often respond negatively to this fact.

The major issues currently affecting women at the level of policy and governance were discussed. The Women's Development Policy has become a major point of contention, especially since it implies an equal distribution of inherited

property between male and female heirs. While activists interpret this as a positive right, religious activists claim that it contradicts Sharia law.

There is also a marked intolerance from the State towards differing views, especially if these come from women. Simultaneously, the influence of the religious clergy has been increasing. A confusion about the role of civil society and NGOs exists as well, as many people see NGOs as corrupt institutions which use foreign aid for personal interests. Raihan said that there was in this sense an increasing intolerance from the State to take anything that contradicted its own ideology or belief. As an example he quoted the experience of Transparency International whose report brought out that the people felt the country's judiciary was the most corrupt of all institutions. The Supreme Court rubbished this statement by critiquing the study for its small sample size.

In terms of state control over new media, the presentation noted that Facebook had been banned in the country in 2010 due to supposedly inflammatory images of the current prime minister, as well as caricatures of Prophet Mohammed. Although barriers were removed later, there is a gradual strengthening of the surveillance mechanism. He shared that an interim government had made a law enabling the State to tape phone conversations for security purposes, which was not scrapped by the later elected government.

Finally, Raihan spoke about a few new media initiatives of institutions in creating participation for women. A few NGOs are identifying deserving beneficiaries of state schemes through text messages informing about the distribution of funds. This ensures that women are aware of

their rights and can claim the amount they are due. Another initiative involves holding hospitals accountable to ensure free medicine delivery provided by the state. Finally, there is also a general mobilisation of interest groups using online platforms and text messages.

## 2. Responses and Perspectives – Zohra Chatterji, Member Secretary, National Commission for Women, India



Zohra Chatterji

Representing perspectives from her experiences in the government and from the field, Chatterji noted that women have always been visible in the Indian democracy. Today, the President, leader of opposition, speaker, etc. are all women. While acknowledging that representation at the local level in *panchayats* is often dominated by 'proxy' women who are guided by male interests,

she also put forth inspiring examples of women who fought for their right to hold positions in local governance bodies. These women should be made role models, she said.

Moving on to the potential of ICTs to overcome social inequalities, she spoke of the National e-Governance Programme instituted by the Government of India. While noting that the programme set itself lofty goals, she also asserted that it could be hugely empowering if successfully implemented. The aim would be to provide all government services in an integrated manner at affordable cost through the three pillars – wide area network to provide broadband access throughout the country, data centre and Common Service Centre's (100 000 of them to be set up of which seventy five thousand are already operational) through public-private partnership

models. These services provide points that can be used by women to access ICT services. They could be further developed for women to register grievances, and obtain redressal.

She mentioned that the history of India's interaction with ICTs dated back to 1987 when the first computers were set up in district offices and later in 1990 when the National Informatics centre was set up. Yet the potential of this technology, she admitted, had not been harnessed adequately and there was need for capacity and administrative building. She also brought up the need to explore other media such as community radio, a powerful tool for participation of democracy, particularly because it bridges the divide of literacy. The mobile phone has become widespread in India, and has also become instrumental in women getting connected to each other (e.g. the SEWA initiative in Gujarat).

Finally, Chatterji spoke about the potential of ICTs to serve as vehicles for delivery of justice. As lodging an incident of domestic violence is a tedious and stressful process, the Common Service Centres can help simplifying the process. ICTs could help women's access to institutions, which is a fundamental step in negotiating one's citizenship.

## 3. Philippines team presentation – Sylvia Estrada-Claudio, Director, Centre for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines, Philippines

The Filipino team presented a few insights based on both theory and their research. Following the feminist literature on gender and technology which has always highlighted the double-edged nature of ICTs, Estrada-Claudio recalled the fact that ICTs can potentially be liberating while also

possibly reproducing social inequalities in digital form. She noted the generally gloomy view of technology by feminist analyses of the relationship between gender and technology, which comes with a reproduction of the "master-slave relationship" between men and women.

She shared how the Philippines have quickly become a business process outsourcing hot bed, which has proven to be both a boon and a bane for working women who earn a lot, but come under bio-political use of corporations for their capitalist profit. There is also a heavy note of class differentiation in ICT usage in country which she exemplified with the 'Jeje-mon' phenomenon where young people from the historically affluent classes are often upset to receive messages or Facebook friend requests or incursions in such spaces from lower class individuals. The openness of the web allows these lower class citizens to enter the bedrooms and libraries of the upper class.

Proceeding from a critical analysis of liberal democracy, the presentation spoke of a nexus between the 'spontaneous creativity' of the masses and the fascist rigid bureaucratic processes of democracy. Estrada-Claudio shared that it would seem that it is that in-between that is made more obvious by the openness and spontaneity of the new systems of communication. Here again, the ability of new technologies to subvert landscapes that encapsulate these identities holds out interesting opportunities.

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Sylvia Estrada-Claudio

The Filipino project challenges the liberal democracy and confronts issues of the digital divide by working with poor women and men. Their processes rely on gender-empowering methods of organising (e.g. transport is

#### 4. Responses and Perspectives – Jahnvi Andharia, Senior Programme Officer, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, India

Andharia began by saying that the use of ICTs for development presupposes a level of literacy, electricity, as well as a basic technology structure. An ICTD scheme probably would not

facilitated; time management allows for plenty of informality; flexibility enables them to perform their ever-increasing reproductive roles). All articles written for the online platform are paid for, which sends out a signal that women's work – traditionally underpaid and considered voluntary – is valued.

Through the writing of news articles, the project insists on making community realities heard in the form of online news articles and reporting. There is an immediate need for this kind of space in Philippines, because the mainstream media pays very little attention to social issues – instead focusing on "hard news" about e.g. political leaders. The news articles are written to influence leaders into passing the bill. This process itself is potentially empowering. In writing articles, the activists seem to be gaining a sharper, clearer understanding, thus enabling the empowerment of the participants.

The presentation ended on the note that ICTs can and do have deleterious effects. For all its attempts at engendering equity, providing better access to a small group inevitably threatens solidarity among marginalised populations. Estrada-Claudio felt the research project must take a discursive view of the lines of agency and victimisation, resistances and take-overs, predictable and unpredictable results. However, she said, that it is the research hypothesis that confrontation will open up considerations of the discursive inter-penetration of gender, ICTs and citizenship. The challenge will allow researchers and participants alike to interrogate the congruences and perhaps find the incongruences that can be an opening for destabilisations and resistances.



Sylvia Estrada-Claudio

work or be relevant for a tribal hinterland located 50 kilometres away from any kind of road communication who is struggling for food entitlement, health and education access.



Jahnvi Andharia

Speaking from the perspective of a funder organisation, Andharia's response also questioned the idea of what is marginal, to whom and how these 'dominant' ideas are defined (according to geography/caste/income criteria?). Along the same lines, she noted that it is important to examine the kind of institutions that were being

mediated by ICTs, listing possible examples like the local *panchayats*, police stations or the Public Distribution System.

She concluded by asking whether the feminist movement itself was seen as an institution and if so how it was being enabled by ICTs. She wondered if there were spaces being created for making the movement more amenable and accessible, or if ICTs were creating one more division of women and technology.

### *Session Discussion*

The Bangladesh presentation seemed to throw up several dichotomies, e.g. between the state and religious extremists. The team was asked if new media enabled the emergence of more nuanced responses to issues, and Raihan clarified that debates about certain issues – such as fatwas – were in fact discussed in nuanced and vibrant ways online.

The issue of language within the localising versus globalising debate was brought up and the pros and cons of a *lingua franca* were questioned. Estrada-Claudio explained that given the the Philippines' colonial history, English has become the language of the elite and ruling classes. Both the civil system and scholars use English exclusively which is unintelligible to the masses. The language of the Internet should be reflective of the passions and spontaneity of the peoples of

the world. On another question about the role of regulation in such a scenario, Estrada-Claudio responded that ideally, a regulation of the Internet would enable architectures that allow abundance and sharing, with nothing proprietary.

The chair, Sumona Dasgupta, wrapped the discussion by noting that the group was beginning to problematise the idea of ICTs. Across the board, it was recognised that ICTs cannot in themselves overcome social rigidities, which means that the architecture of the questions asked has to be rethought to a certain extent. Also obvious is the difference between the technocratic alienating side of the ICTs as against the social impact of the technology. She ended by saying that it is this conversation we must begin to privilege.