SESSION VI: Forging community and creating identity – New articulations of citizenship in the information society

This session looked at how the network society redefines the public sphere, providing a new architecture for building community and defining identity, thus allowing for new gender orders to emerge. How do boundaries of given notions like citizenship get pushed with respect to the new possibilities for associational democracy and assertion of women's collective rights? What may be specific concerns for a Southern discourse on women's citizenship in relation to new community formations and identities?

Chair : Urvashi Butalia, Director, Kali for Women, India

The chair began the session by putting forward a few thoughts on the broad topic of the session. In context of the mention of markets in the previous discussion, she shared her experience as a feminist publisher entering the world of new technology. Although it opens new worlds in interesting ways, she felt that it did not necessarily change the structures of power, at least not in the initial stages. As an example she mentioned how large American publishing houses have entered the e-world by having a hold over academics and not allowing them to sign their e-publishing rights to other publishers. As a feminist publisher in the South, one has to figure new approaches on such issues. Even though social media can begin a sense of solidarity for a specific cause, she also wondered to what extent social movements based on social media can be effective in actually bringing about lasting change.

1. Sri Lanka team presentation – Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda, Director, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka

Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda

Kottegoda began by sharing some questions that she felt had come through the previous sessions. These included questions on how ICTs could be instrumental in bringing a shift in the nature of the public sphere, how women are to reassert their rights in these spaces and the new identities and relations thus forming from the specific position of the Southern feminists.

She said that ICTs by themselves as a means of communication were 'constructed' precisely through and for social interaction between persons but the larger question emerged from the clear indication that access to economic resources, political power and military control are also very much part of the baggage of ICTs – defining the arena of who actually will have access or not and what it will be used for. In the context of Sri Lanka, with its high developmental indicators, (re)defining women's citizenship through new media, should result in an increased visibility of women in the public sphere, in decision-making structures, but is not significantly so. A gendered lens on decision-making structures shows the disparate access to political power for women and men. The representation of women in media, as reporters, editors, sub-editors, as those recognised as 'making' news is similarly significantly low. Within the debates on citizenship, these factors illustrate almost an acceptance, albeit uncomfortably, of differential and discriminatory practices in power politics that leave women 'in the margins' of 'enjoying' their rights as citizens.

Kottegoda talked about the *nenasalas*, the telecentre project of the Sri Lankan government which over the last decade has aimed at providing digital access to the citizens. The facilities offered are 'gender-neutral' in their approach so far. There is no clearly articulated vision that recognises socio-economic or cultural factors that may underlie differential access and use of ICTs by women and by men. Despite this, emerging patterns indicate that changes are taking place at the community level; women,

especially young women, are engaging with ICTs as individuals through using the facilities of *nenasalas*, through creating their own blogs. These *nenasalas* have become nodal in providing access to ICTs and it is notable that they are creating a space for women, however constrained by class or ethnic or regional locations of the individuals. The post-conflict scenario has also demonstrated, in parallel, the government's discomfort with social media, such as Facebook, which it has tried to ban on the pretext that anti-government or non-patriotic sentiments were expressed on the online platform.

The focus of the Sri Lankan project, she shared, was informed by the experience of living through ethnic conflict, a devastating tsunami and the ensuing humanitarian and development efforts that revealed the call for exploring women and their exercise of citizenship. The two interventions of the research – the media campaign for women's representation in the local government and the SMS news network – are exercises to assert the rights for women's citizenship. She brought up questions of new media also require to deal with issues of being left behind. She ended by leaving questions about its possibilities of gender equality, to empower IT literate community and to broaden the public sphere.

2. Hong Kong/Taiwan team presentation – Kate Lappin, Regional Coordinator, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, Thailand

Lappin began by sharing the purpose of the project undertaken: to explore the possibilities of ICTs to build solidarity and power amongst migrant domestic workers, while challenging the exclusionary practices of citizenship narratives. She said that several participants spoke about the potential of ICTs to disrupt the hegemony of the liberal or neo-liberal masculine subject as the citizen. The exclusion of migrant domestic workers from citizenry can then be seen as the ultimate expression of the liberal, public, rational subject. If the subject can only be known through its attenuation, its other, then the primacy of the

---

The binary between real and virtual/imagined communities has proved unhelpful when working with migrant domestic workers.

<div align="right">Kate Lappin</div>

---

citizen of liberal discourse is premised on the exclusion of women migrant domestic workers as its other.

As migrants, she said, they are aliens of the nation-state, as women they are the irrational, anti-politic and, most importantly, as domestic workers they are outside of the assumed public sphere and re-scribe the sexual division of labour

that obliterates the value of women's work. This last category, she said, is particularly magnified in the neo-liberal capitalist narratives of citizenship, which indicate that privileges of citizenship should only be afforded to economically profitable subjects. The abysmal treatment of many

Kate Lappin

migrant domestic workers is only possible through this process of 'othering' – the other of the nation state, the other of the productive worker, the other of the citizen.

She acknowledged Gurumurthy's point that desired changes are contingent on practices of the state. Claiming something akin to citizenship rights as we know them is a long road for migrant domestic workers. But she hoped that the project could make some small inroads.

To the question of whether ICTs promised enhanced rights, she stated that citizenship begins with the awareness of the possibilities of being a rights claimant. ICTs can facilitate access to information about rights and may enable migrant domestic workers to envision citizenry as a possibility, but it is the building of collectivity that moves rights from a fiction or a

narrative for the privileged to a possibility, albeit a small one. She argued that the imperative to create synergy between technological and physical organising was enormously compelling. The binary between real and virtual/imagined communities has proved unhelpful in their work. Even though having a day off is an advantage for organising, that option is not always present which requires investigating into work without the physical. However, the very idea of a 'public' sphere either virtual or physical is inaccessible to many migrant domestic workers, particularly those who do not have a day off. Moreover, poor women have rarely been allowed into the public and the virtual 'public sphere', which are equally governed by neo-liberal markets where poor women are the fuel but not the citizens of a globalised, neo-liberal world.

Traditional organising models used in the labour movement are based on the assumption of physical access. Those models, and the laws of many countries, only recognise the right to freedom of association when workers are found in a single workplace. Organising, she said, is about building solidarity, building collective power – the question is whether ICTs can assist migrant women workers to gain solidarity and power and reduce isolation. Assumptions that ICTs is free and open do not easily apply to many domestic workers. Accessing ICTs is dangerous, any traces of defiance or resistance they leave could have serious consequences.

She addressed a question put forth earlier about whether the project would seek to organise women based on the nationalities or to instead build solidarity across boundaries of nation state and ethnicity. Even though she acknowledge it should be the target, there is need to grapple with one's own ICT limitations to build an online community of solidarity. With this she ended by welcoming ideas and contributions from others in this community about innovative uses of ICTs to advance the collective rights of migrant domestic workers.

3.   Responses and Perspectives – Desiree Lewis, Associate Professor, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Desiree Lewis

Lewis directed her response to the two presentations made in this session, intertwining them with her experiences in Africa. She began by sharing her thoughts on the Thailand/Taiwan paper. Despite the optimism about globalisation and the borderlessness of a virtual world, the paper shows that national boundaries continue to play a major role in regulating divisions between centres and peripheries and centres within peripheries. With the control of resources and exploitation of labour that this generates, migrant women are especially vulnerable, often unable to access rights and under constant surveillance. She added that xenophobic attacks starkly raised what this paper makes clear: struggles of migrants for rights must be explored in gendered terms, and the effective use of media to support their rights must address their gendered locations.

While the use of mobiles for organising was interesting, she noted it was also fraught with problems. One was the targeting by telecoms of women as markets, where making high levels of cell phone use and purchase simply reinforces power relations where migrants are exploited as consumers. In other words, the economic gains for consumer capitalism may far exceed the political gains of migrants. This raises the need to avoid over-estimating localised evidence of marginalised groups' appropriation of ICTs when the promotion of this technology is central to consumer capitalism.

Another central issue, she said, was how the nation state (and in turn, national capital and global capitalism) is consolidated and reconfigured by modern information and communications systems. The surveillance of domestic workers by their employers mirrors the broader policing of borders – of boundaries between citizens and aliens, nationals and

outsiders – orchestrated by the formidable apparatus of the network society. So overall, it is important to contextualise the political potential of the use of technology like cell phones by exploring the broader structural context in which ICTs both economically exploit and politically control migrants in extreme ways. Lewis then shared some avenues for further interrogation for example learning about not so public tactical alliances that women might make and the researcher's dilemmas therein.

On the Sri Lankan paper, Lewis said she was struck by the attention to how discourses of culture can constrain women's citizenship, even when legal rights may seem to guarantee gender equality and that the country might have 'high social level indicators'. Very often, liberal states grant women impressive formal rights (rights to abortion, rights protecting them from domestic violence, etc.), yet, they are always ready to regulate their citizenship in terms of their gendered contribution. As a backlash, authoritarian patriarchal nationalism castigates women's disobedience. In the face of this, crafting an effective feminist media is difficult. But this crafting, she said, also seems to be a vital radical step in fully challenging the patriarchal nation state, rather than only petitioning it for rights. She ended by saying that the fact that the investigation of this media will be undertaken through action research suggests that the nuances of following women's difficult struggles with developing independent voices, and empowering themselves as autonomous subjects in order to make powerful claims about their rights as full subjects will be fully explored.

Discussion

The floor being opened for discussion, Devika mentioned that she felt the group should not allow itself to fall into the overly mechanistic understanding of the utility of interventions. She felt that the presence of feminist interventions are meaningful irrespective of whether they bring about immediate change: one should not be caught by the idea of immediate results. Sepali Kottegoda agreed by stressing the common issue faced by organisations working on ideological issues of being tied by time-based project cycles which require filling in immediate results.

Estrada-Claudio suggested that addressing issues of global citizenship could be relevant, especially in the case of migrant workers. At a time where xenophobic nationalism is used to limit their rights, the research has the possibility of posing itself as a spring board for questions on global citizenship and its definitions. Kate Lappin responded by saying that the claim to rights was at the heart of their organising work and that the organisation was engaging with regional and international debates on women's rights in this regard.

Gurumurthy said that perchance, the panel came at a time when the core of intersections between discourses on gender, democracy, new technology and citizenship were swirling in our heads. She felt the panel brought forth some essential questions. She spoke in particular of the need for a legal policy framework, asking about the nature of the regulations required to fairly challenge the existing power structures. This has to consider the co-optation of the rights discourse by libertarian frameworks to serve global capital and the collusion of the state with capital to disenfranchise poor women's citizenship. In the face of this reality, the dialogue that the network needs to take forth is what then provides the enabling framework within nation states in terms of allowing poor women to access technology and stopping capitalism from running amok; where in a post-national existence we can be global citizens in a way that information society and its structures do not take away our citizenship.

Susanna George brought up the issue of the interaction between offline and online spaces. In the context of migrant domestic workers, she felt that the old methods of organising, such as leaflets and pamphlets at grocery stores, radio programmes in their language, should also be explored as they might have greater reach. Kate Lappin responded by saying that the study on

mobiles was part of the larger project on organising women migrant domestic workers through various mediums where community radio, among others, were being explored.

Lewis also added as an observation that one should be cognizant of how one engages. There is a tendency to exhaust oneself on government projects before coming to the conclusion that it does not work. One should all the more be wary in times where the current liberal state often flirts with NGOs on issues keeping them aside.

The chair, Urvashi Butalia, ended the session with two thoughts. First, she observed that the business of virtual activism was very convenient for the state. It was more difficult for the state to deal with physical presence. We romanticise Tahrir Square and what the Internet did there, but would it have happened it people did not actually occupy that space? In a way, she felt that the public was getting leached off and sanitised whereas we actually need to take it into account. She also shared an observation of the migrant domestic workers in Delhi who increasingly possess mobile phones. One of the luxuries afforded by it is listening to music which brings a strong sense of entitlement to have what was previously availed only by the middle class.