

## SESSION III: Making network society deliver for gender justice - Some answers and questions from the CITIGEN researches

*Presentations in this session drew upon situated research in different contexts, addressing the following points:*

- *The context and issues*
- *What the research explored*
- *What the research found – a thesis on technology, networks, gender and citizenship*
- *Open questions – for theory and practice*

*Presenters:*

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*Sri Lanka: Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda, Director, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka; and Sarala Emmanuel, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka*

*China: Lam Oi Wan, Regional Editor for Northeast Asia, globalvoicesonline.org, China*

*Chair: Lisa McLaughlin, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Professor, Miami University, USA*

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**Binitha V. Thampi - Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai, India**

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The project Empowering Women Leaders at the Local Level: Translating Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation through ICTs', primarily explores the possibilities of the creation of a new technologically mediated 'invented space' for empowering women and also, more importantly, revitalising 'invited spaces' of governance and to enable their active civic and political engagement at the local level in Kerala.

The digital platform created for this purpose was named – *Gramamukhya*, which in Malayalam means 'head of the local government'. Building a 'communication community' within the emerging transnational public sphere, it also explores the possibility of building solidarity across differences. It employs Andrea Cornwall's and Miraftab's formulation of 'invited spaces' as state provided legitimate spaces for the participation and practice of citizenship.

Speaking of the, 'invited and invented spaces', Binitha expanded by defining 'invited spaces' as – the ones occupied by those grassroots and their

allied non-governmental organisations that are legitimised by donors and government interventions. 'Invented spaces' are those occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo. Miraftab points out that the invitation to participate becomes a site for 'citizenship participation' only "when citizens gain meaningful opportunities to exercise voice and hold to account those who invite them to participate". It is in the interaction and movement between these spaces of invitation and invention, that the practice of citizenship becomes politically effective.

Coming to the Kerala context of women in local government, the state has devolved around 35 to 40 percent of the state budget to local governments. It is a massive decentralisation process that started with the 9<sup>th</sup> plan period of India. Also 33 percent reservation for women, and in some states upto 50 percent, in the local level political bodies was included through the constitutional amendment. Quotas for women have been seen as 'affirmative action' instituted in the spirit of gender equality in political representation.



Binitha Thampi

Studies of women in local governance from Kerala show how provisions of quotas in local bodies are an insufficient condition for women's political participation and effective empowerment. They also point out that a large numbers of women in local governance in Kerala has not resulted in their substantive representation. It is therefore relevant to examine the underlying assumptions and practices associated with the 'invited spaces' of participation and the process of gendering governance in Kerala on the ground. Gender mainstreaming efforts of the state are ongoing. It started with a mass campaign during the 9<sup>th</sup> plan period and by instituting the Women Component Plan (which sets apart 10 percent of the Plan funds for women) and moved forward by incorporating the women into the local level decision making bodies and by having a large number of training programmes exclusively for women, and ensuring their participation and representation in the local level decision making bodies.

In 2005, Kerala legislated 50 percent reservation for women in local government. Such gender mainstreaming policies have tended to assume automatic transformation on the ground and have not taken cognisance of how the intervention interacts with existing power structures and relations. Moreover, evaluation of the participation of women in local governance has revealed that while they are competent in their role as managers of development programmes, they are far removed from local political institutions and associated power. Therefore, an interrogation of the state-led gender mainstreaming effort was required.

The underlying assumption of these efforts has been that transformation to a gender-just society is possible in a non-confrontational manner through gender training and the development of certain individual skills as the principal tool for transformation. The focus of gender-training on individual transformation precludes the coming together of women as a group to build a politics of solidarity based on shared experiences. Such a framework is not conducive to mutual exchange and learning, as well as, horizontal networking among women from diverse backgrounds and dispersed geographies that is very vital for any process of collective empowerment. A cursory glance at the gender training manuals of both – those prepared by the state and those of experts from women's organisations – reveals a top-

down pedagogy, however participatory it may be.

Coming to the 'invented space', and why digital space was used as an 'invented space', Binitha stated that – 'invited spaces' are state defined, geographically demarcated administrative spaces within whose boundaries women must limit their sphere of action. But bounded action within a bureaucratic, vertical structure was rarely empowering. An 'invented space', which was a digital space could overcome this limitation. Such an ICT mediated space of interaction had the potential to enable its users to cut across geographical barriers to communication by taking place in cyberspace. There were many examples, during the last two or three terms, of women leaders who had resisted prevailing patriarchal structures from within the 'invited spaces' of local governance, and had even come out to stand on their own. Yet, there was no mechanism for sharing their experience with others who were still serving in order to build solidarity without having to deal with issues of geographical separation. Indeed, women's own political aspirations could be developed from this fertile ground in the 'invented space' while remaining within the 'invited space' of governance.

The broad research questions addressed in the action research were:

1. How does one build political solidarity among women across differences at different levels?
2. To what extent can women in local governance employ ICTs to transform their participation substantively in the public domain in Kerala?
3. What are the strategies for their effective politicisation as against efforts at gender mainstreaming by the state?
4. What does the feminist appropriation of technology involve in the context of creating Gramamukhya digital platform?

Coming to the methodology, Binitha said that the 'invented space' outlined in the project involved a process of consciousness building and creation of new political subjectivities and agency among women in governance through a self-initiated, shared deliberation, in a language that they collectively articulate. There were significant differences among women leaders in terms of affiliation to party politics, which some observers from Kerala see as a major hindrance to their



collectivisation. Hence, building solidarity, both, across horizontal and vertical networks had to be a process of working across differences. Here, the 'horizontal' referred to the networking among women presidents of local governments in the state and also with ex-presidents. 'Vertical' referred to their networking with women's organisations, feminist scholars, activists, women writers, migrant women workers etc. Such an approach, it was felt, would hopefully result in collectively rebuilding the gender lens that was shadowed within the mainstreaming discourse and through which new meanings of empowerment and politicisation could be created, and strategies to bargain with patriarchy devised in specific contexts. Primarily due to the brief time frame of the project, ten months, three districts in Kerala were selected – Trivandrum, Malappuram and Kannur.

These districts represented not only the south, central and north Kerala but also covered its political party variation. The project also created a support group of women party presidents who have struggled and emerged successful against the exercise of power within their spheres of action in their previous two to three terms in office. They played a mediating role between serving presidents and the project research team in facilitating the creation of the digital forum. It was hoped that their presence in the project (and it turned out to be true later), would provide serving presidents as well as new entrants, an opportunity for horizontal learning from their past experiences.

Another methodological issue was that of feminist appropriation of technology – the question of how technology could be appropriated for feminist goals. The rights based approach to ICTs has viewed the potential of digital technologies as being able to give voice to women in the Third world, often in transgressive spaces but feminist scholars writing on the effective use of ICTs in the South caution that unless women are empowered to define the conditions under which they interact online and to form meaningful trans-local alliances towards transforming their personal and political contexts, the mere access to and use of ICTs will not amount to a feminist appropriation of technology. Therefore, an important part of this project was to enable women leaders to creatively use them as tools for furthering their personal and political empowerment. However, ensuring basic technical literacy and ease of use

of computers and the Internet was inevitable. The wider goal in conducting workshops (around 20 to 24 workshops were conducted) was to stress the need to collectively reflect on the politics behind the use of technology by women for their collectivisation and to facilitate discussions among them. The workshops conducted were, therefore, free flowing and discussed the question of women's access to existing ICT facilities, both, at home and their offices and to deliberate upon the kind of challenges faced by women in using the same. Several examples were for the women to overcome techno-phobia.

Binitha then explained the features of the digital forum. *Gramamukhya* has one hundred and twenty six serving and nine former women presidents who are registered members. It was developed in the local language (Malayalam) with no English text. The team has been working hard to remove English. The platform has three main sections – one deals with access to information; second, exclusively with group discussions and third, is for self expression. The first called 'Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing' (*Arividam*) primarily deals with questions on governance. There the effort is to build an archive of good material for the women to read. A consultant has been hired, who exclusively deals with this from Centre of Development Studies, Trivandrum. The 'Discussion Forum' (*Charchavedi*) and 'Writer's Blog' (*Ezhuthidam*) are related to the wider notion of public life and are mutually reinforcing. The writer's blog is to familiarise the members with women's writing in the state. In contrast to the many limitations of women's effective participation, in what may be called 'the invited spaces of governance', *Gramamukhya*, represents an 'invented space' for an alternative gender politics.

*Gramamukhya* has been designed and built through a participatory, 'design-in-use' perspective, dynamically engaging with its initiators, users and developers in a continuous dialogue. It was important to understand the interaction between both the original design intention of the project and its interpretation by users in varying contexts. These changes were incorporated in different versions of the portal in order to enhance the effective use of the technology.

Binitha then went on to describing the findings of the project. She shared that there were quite a



few challenges and risks in building a politics of solidarity. It was not an easy task undertaken in a one year project period. The difficulty was the party divide across the state and the team's decision to not use party connections to organise. Also the team did not use existing contacts and connections with the state reigning institutions as it would fail the whole purpose of the project. Hence it was quite difficult. Also the local *panchayat* presidents were very busy and were travelling all the time. So, finding them was very difficult.

The team also had to deal with the differences, particularly with the political differences known to exist in the state of Kerala - the left politics is very militant. Each time they were approached, the women would consult their party bosses as to whether they should attend or not. Despite the general access and acceptance of ICTs in Kerala, the particularities of localities, the differences within, primarily of age and levels of income and education etc. do in fact lead to differential levels of ICT acceptance and use. The team realised that the effort to bring together all members was not required. Instead, the team thought of developing a critical mass who would actually make use of this digital forum and they could later link with other women in the offline context.

The website design, and its eventual appropriation by women leaders, rested largely on its content which in turn has been facilitated through the project's association with feminist scholars and writers. The team, she said, is still in the process of developing more content. Women leaders were encouraged to read these articles and biographies of successful women in public domain and were introduced to the new version which was very user friendly. Apart from building awareness and encouraging discussions on issues of local governance and politics in Kerala, the project has been able to generate interest in feminist literature among women leaders and some have even expressed an interest in writing themselves. So, in the second version a feature was added for them to start their own blogs. Here, it must be noted that while many were happy to share their identity online, others preferred to remain anonymous while they make politically sensitive comments/responses. The team is currently working on the user-interface of the digital platform to enable this requirement as well.

Looking ahead, she said, there were two aspects

to note – one was regarding the future of the digital platform and the second was the research. It was not the teams intention to transfer a finished product within the duration of the project, she said. The question of who owns and maintains the site is very important and the team expected to hand the project over, in the coming year. Yet at the same time, the team would remain within the vertical network as researchers in this area. It was important to continue the project for a longer period of time.

The project, she said, as it unfolds over the coming few months, will provide insights into the politics of solidarity building across differences within the trans-local digital space. It remained to be seen how ICT mediated communities-in-the-making could politicise women in governance and enable them to claim their citizenship rights and position themselves in the public domain. Perhaps certain new communication practices and modes would emerge. More importantly, focusing on transactions between online and offline contexts would provide insights and indeed – even generate questions on cyber activism.

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**Chandrika Sepali Kottegoda - Director, Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka; and Sarala Emmanuel - Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka**

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Sepali began the presentation of the project by sharing that the Sri Lankan programme looked at ICTs access for women in the margins. Sri Lanka presents itself as a country in South Asia that has high 'social development' indicators, but to cut the long story short, there is a significant gap between men and women – in their access to resources and avenues of decision making. One is more critical of Sri Lanka's achievements, when we look at the women's participation and representation in the political arena and the high levels of structural and social violence against women. Women continue to face challenges in relation to ensuring state compliance with international treaties. Sri Lanka is a signatory to every UN convention on women but this is simultaneous with the war, which lasted thirty years. The war ended in 2009 and the conflict continues. As a result of the war, not only the ethnic conflict but also the conflict that took place in the South in the late 1980s, has resulted in a large number of female headed households. These critical conversations of women and





gender relations do not get reflected in the mainstream media and certainly not in the state run media over the last seven years. IT, in such a scenario, is opening up unexplored avenues.



Sepali Kottegoda

Sepali shared that when the team was invited by IT for Change to participate, initially there was reluctance as they felt they did not know anything about IT. But the younger people in the team, who were interested, engaged very happily. The team looked at the women located at the margins of the nation-state. 'Margins'

referred to the margins of political processes, in terms of knowledge creation, access to ICTs, languages and discourse and mainstream development processes. By knowledge creation, one does not mean that women are in the margins of knowledge creation but imply that women are marginalised in their expression of knowledge. So knowledge is created but the knowledge of women tends to be sidelined. There are two main local languages in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil, and women's use of the local languages and what they want to say remains marginalised in the representation in the mainstream media. Also explored, was the engagement of women through the state *Nenasala* (community telecentres) programmes for improving access to ICTs in rural areas. The team, additionally, looked at the experiences of local women's groups using SMS technologies to run a local women's news network. They also studied women's experiences in campaigning for local elections across five districts and the experiences of Sinhala and Tamil language women bloggers in their engagement with new media.

The state began many telecentres across the country, most of it in the south. In 2002, the first comprehensive plan for the development of ICTs as a key tool with which to promote economic growth and national integration, was initiated. It enabled the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector and service provisioning. It also provided an enabling environment for the Telecentre Family Project of which was run by Sarvodaya, an organisation which reaches all parts of the country. It encouraged community participation – specifically targeting youth, children and farmers. The telecentres were to focus on telemedicine, e-commerce, e-governance.

Mediums used to create awareness included provincial forums and brainstorm sessions, use of a social networking and blogging. However, the programme did not specifically target women or consciously include women in their ICT skills development programmes. WMC's research revealed that though the *Nenasalas* had opened up some new work opportunities for women and enabled the emergence of a social space for women's learning to come out in some communities, it was still a difficult struggle for women to negotiate their social roles and effectively participate in such spaces. Women's access issues were not a part of the conscious design of the *Nenasalas*. This is not surprising when we analyse the e-Sri Lanka programme and other national level ICT policies through a gender lens. We find that there has not been much conversation on the strategic use of ICTs for the empowerment of women by national policies and bodies that have targeted women. Thus, the mere availability of ICTs does not mean that access was ensured to women and girls.

Although in Sri Lanka over the past few years one finds that a lot of young people are 'doing computers' and there is knowledge that you need computer literacy yet the understanding stops there. Agencies such as the Ministry for Women's Empowerment have a vital role to play in mobilising women to access, control and create content in relation to ICTs but unfortunately, they do not engage with ICTs in any manner. Even their website is not updated.

Sarala then took over the presentation and shared the work relating to *Minmini Seithihal* (Firefly News), the local level SMS news network which was run in the east of Sri Lanka. This project was an experimental first initiative for the organisation. The team had the idea, and after extensive discussion it was set up and the approval of the research project helped the project to take off. 'Margins', here implied working with women who are in the margins of socio-political processes, because the country was recovering from a conflict and Batticaloa is one of the poorest districts in Sri Lanka and also on the margins of discourse, of knowledge and has Tamil speaking women. So, a lot of issues regarding the importance of women controlling and creating knowledge, apply here.

In the beginning, interviews with the women involved and focus group discussions were undertaken. Midway, a review of everyone who

was receiving the SMS news was undertaken and at the end, workshops and focus group discussions to understand the process, judge impact and assimilate the experiences of women involved was undertaken.

As one of the *Minmini* news readers said, "I do not take news from the Internet, I go to do field work and I give the news to *Minmini* as soon as I get it from the field. My friends also share news with me through the telephone. Last week, I received information that due to lightning and flooding, 13 cows were dead. As part my work, I found out that 17 cows were dead. For some matters, I go directly and find out the truth. During the flood period, I got to know through some colleagues that there were two suicides by farmers who had lost their crops which I reported to *Minmini*. For the follow up reports, I talked with the police and the *grama sevaka* through the telephone and found the accurate details regarding these incidents".

This was an example of how women who are involved in the network link up, because they work within the rural villages and within the communities. This constant interaction with the communities is how they recognise relevant news, convey it, the team verifies and then sends it out. Some of the interesting learnings were that phones are usually shared a lot. It is not an individually used asset but it is shared in the homes, shared among friends. There are different SIM cards, so many people use the same phone. The news is also not received by only one person and is shared with at least a minimum of three other people – mother or family, or work colleagues. So it was realised that the reach is defined not just by the number of mobile phones the news was sent to but far more.

Sarala pointed out that the mobility of the mobile phone allowed women to receive news on the move, anywhere. Also an SMS was more definite, than hearing something over the phone where you do not remember all the details. A message is saved and can be retrieved. The need for access to information was driven home by one of the readers who said, "It is difficult for me and the others to go out and get information in our environment. Everyone is busy. We all have mobile phones in our hands so it is good to get news from where we are located. Without any expenses I am getting news from what has happened around me."

The content of the news was developed along four thematic areas. One was regarding natural disasters because when this project started Batticaloa was seriously flooded. Additionally, the issue of war and post war accountability was handled. In terms of the floods, the women's network that was involved in the *Minmini*, did consistent monitoring of what was going on in terms of the impact and responses and tried to intervene as much as possible to provide a gender perspective and the need for a gender analysis in the disaster response. This was enabled by *Minmini* news. The network was a voice for women and also a mode through which information could be shared.

The issue of war was very sensitive because even though active warfare was over, the control, surveillance, militarisation continued. Talking about rights issues and about what happened during the phases of the war, was not possible. The network created a space to do that and this was done through the circulation of non-controversial information (for example, "government is issuing death certificates for those who have gone missing due to the war and disaster; a 27-year-old woman whose husband has disappeared in 2009 says if she accepts it, she can't search for him and can't ask anyone to search for him. So, she doesn't want to register"). The approach was to problematise some of the government responses and try to create an awareness and discussion around them.



Sarala Emmanuel

Another strategy used was to discuss the deep impact of conflict on women by creating a serial – nine episodes of a woman's story with her permission. So everyday Jyoti episodes would be sent. That helped women speak in greater detail about the impact of war and challenges being facing. It was also fun to try and serialise because SMS is short, so you have to generate interest for people to read the next one.

The lesson for us was this worked because of the relationship of trust among the women. This was very important during the war and even now, when there is such silence on human rights violations. There is a lot of media control, people are just silenced and there is self censorship as well. So *Minmini* worked because the women who

were sharing the news, trusted each other and knew that the news that is sent out is sent out with care and it is politically sensitive. If it can have an impact on the reporter, the news is not sent or is worded in a different way. For example, the team receives regular updates on issues of violence against women instead of sending these out as is, the team studies trends and then reports the analysis. The approach is analytical and not fashioned like 'breaking news'.

One of the constant challenges is the language because the team is forced to use the English font. However, saying that, over the year women have become very competent in using the English font, reading the news and understanding. Once people replace mobile phones in a year or two, the Tamil font can be sent and it would make reading much easier as the target audience is mostly Tamil speaking local women.

Sepali took over from her and added that the project also looked at the question of the representation of women in the national media. In the case of Sri Lanka, the reality was that many women, whether in politics or outside of it, have limited engagement with ICTs. A website which profiled women in politics from the five districts who wanted to contest the local government elections and had been through different political parties, was put up. A lot of visits were made, photographs, interviews etc. taken and all of it was posted. The analysis of the campaign did influence discourses in the mainstream media regarding the importance of women in decision making forums. The campaign succeeded in mainstreaming the idea that women should be involved in local government as well as national government. However, in the 2011 local government elections, there was no significant increase in nominations from women candidates. This was because structurally the system is against women even being offered nominations by political parties and by the fact that the voter base still does not take to the idea of voting for women very easily because of the entrenched belief that it is the men who make decisions and are seen as decision makers. New media certainly provides essential tools, spaces and voice for collective action as the WMC campaign demonstrates.

This experience clearly demonstrates the need to move towards a policy framework that is cognisant of the structures of the information society within which ICTs are embedded, rather

than one which sees ICTs as mere tools for growth and development. The way the Sri Lankan state has responded is the latter.

Additionally, a gender audit of the latest 100 posts in two different Sinhala language blog aggregators was undertaken. Working with the female bloggers it was realised that the writing was more oriented towards personal diary entries and creative writing. Some of the bloggers were journalist who were working for mainstream media or had media and for them, the blog was a release – a space where they could say what they wanted, whether they wanted to make a political comment or share a personal experience. WMC is now planning to work with women bloggers specifically and it was the first time they made a foray into this work. The team had to do a search and bring together the women bloggers and when they came together, the discussion was mostly regarding diaries and personal writing. The bloggers were asked if there was a possibility for more critical thinking and engagement with each other and share blogs with each other. It seemed that they were more interested in putting their work online than in linking up with each other. This initiative is still in that initial stage of space for expression, Sepali said.

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**Lam Oi Wan - Regional Editor for Northeast Asia, [globalvoicesonline.org](http://globalvoicesonline.org), China**

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Oi Wan began by saying that she wished to focus more on the process of her research. Her topic was 'Women's online participation and transformation of citizenship' and it covered two cities: Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

The two cities although under one country, have very different political systems and society. Hong Kong is a post-colonial city and was under the British colonial rule for over a century and became a part of China only in 1997. The city has a more well-established civil society especially after the twin massacre in 1989. This was because after the massacre the local society decided to politicise themselves by merging with the international discourse of human rights and citizen's rights. Hence, there is a very strong citizen's movement since the early 90's and the civil society has grown out of that. After the handover to the China government, the civil society went through a change because the



government was giving more funding to NGOs for social service rather than political action. So, now Hong Kong has a very big social service sector but the political society is shrinking.

Guangzhou, which is under the Chinese communist rule, is politically quite repressive but economically it is very liberal. Even the media has some space to play around with commercial news. They like to report about corrupt officials or problems in the society and are quite outspoken. They make use of the economic liberal environment to report 'breaking news' and sometimes undertake critical reporting.



Lam Oi Wan

The research was about women's participation. As women are in different social positions, the framework of the research is with the more established organisations. The second level was with network organisation and the third level with individual women activists.

For the first level of analysis in Guangzhou, the All-China Women Federation, which is a semi-governmental organisation and is closely connected to the parties and under the leadership of a party, was studied. Getting an interview with them was very difficult. Oi Wan had to link with a local university and get their name card as a researcher and then approach the organisation. Still, in the field most of the interviews were done informally. Some people even said, "do not ever quote my name, if you quote something I said, I will deny that I said it". One of the interviewees, was newly recruited and quite outspoken. He was an active netizen who took note of what was happening in the society and also participated online actively. He went into the organisation with his own belief about human rights and also his belief in public engagement online. He tried introducing new ways of dealing with online public opinion and wrote a proposal and eventually got a part of what he wanted which was a micro blogging account for the federation. Yet getting this account was very difficult. All other publications are pre-censored but it is difficult to pre-censor micro blogging. This story tells, how things operate in semi-governmental NGO. There is a some feasibility but also a lot of constraint.

As for the network organisation, they studied

Gender Action Network, which was formed by a number of women's scholars and professional media workers. Many of them had attended gender training in the programme organised by the Michigan University and a local university in Shanghai. Many of their members were very conscious about the discussions of gender equity but because of the legal constraint they could not register as a formal organisation which meant that they could not publicly engage in fund-raising or receive funds from organisations. They had to make use of their personal network to pool together resources for their meetings and also their seminars. The network regularly hosts seminars and sometimes organises online petitions through their personal network. They have an email list to coordinate the online petition to discuss issues related to women's rights and gender equity. For example, if there was a domestic violence case in Guangzhou, they would get together saying – we need to take action and help the public understand what is going on with this case and how it affects all of us. Then they would try to engage in advocacy through online tools.

The individual activists group were very diverse. An interview with a woman in her 60s, who was a retired engineer revealed that she only knew how to get online after a protest because she felt she needed to get the information out so she started learning micro blogging from her friend at the protest site. Later, she became an expert online, for example, she would do research regarding regulations on the property development agents. She then organised the community to fight against the property agents.

There were also very young activists who were born in the online environment. For them the Internet was a part of their culture and they did everything online. They shared, they spoke about issues. Because of the censorship in China, they were very well aware that if the information was sensitive, they had to distribute it very quickly. They saw themselves as agents who are countering the government's censorship.

In Hong Kong, the situation was quite different. From the well established organisations, a feminist group called Association for the Advancement of Feminism, was chosen. It was established in the 80s, first as a women's organisation and politicised in the 90s. They tried to advocate legal reform in Hong Kong against discrimination by introducing the UN law into



Hong Kong. After the 2000s, when the equal opportunity commission was established in Hong Kong and another women's commission was established in Hong Kong, they were absorbed into the government institutions as consultation bodies. Their role in the civil society has since changed. They have their own channel to deliver their ideas so to some extent they are walking away from public engagement. Internally too they see problems with the mainstreaming strategy within the organisation but somehow they do not have the resources or the momentum to engage with the public. In the 80s, the organisation was a hub for local feminists to access resources to discuss, but because of the development of gender studies in the university, their library has become less influential. Most of the discussion has moved from the civil society to the academic which is very de-politicised.

In Hong Kong, there is a lot of research undertaken on gender and feminism – but in the university, which does not address the everyday life problems or the social problems of the society. In the civic chapter, it is assaulted by the existing government channel and public engagement has become very weak.

For the network organisation, a lesbian group was studied. They run their video project and they train a group of volunteers to produce their own programme and have a very strong sense of awareness to build their own community and engage with public and negotiate with the government through new media. Although they are not in a position to put forward their recommendation to the government directly, there is some interaction between this small group and the more well established group.

The individual activists in Hong Kong, have come from grassroot mobilisations, like mobilisation against demolitions or to preserve old buildings, against development projects etc. Many individuals stay connected to an NGO as well or a political organisation. They wish to act individually as any organisational attachment will have some implications, for example organisations do not allow individuals to use their names. Hence, they come out in their own capacity and work through their own links and resources. They are also not very conscious about discussions on feminism. Some of them are quite critical of the local feminists because they think women's organisations are getting a lot of resources from the government but they are not

radical or they do not actively participate in social mobilisation. Hence, there is a kind of hostility between individual activists and women's organisations in Hong Kong.

### **Discussion:**

Lisa mentioned that when it comes to information technology and gender and its implications for citizenship – gender mainstreaming has a constant presence. People do not appropriately criticise gender mainstreaming or go deeply enough into the issues.

Crystal directed a question at Sepali and Sarala. Post conflict situations created a culture of silence because women did not want to speak. Being a journalist and knowing the nature of news, she felt, that it was all about power - who has access and the power of words. She felt that the Sri Lanka project was very innovative. In terms of moving ahead with the project, she asked if they see a locally based technology being created for instance, like MXIT in South Africa, where one could actually use the platform for free to transmit news.

Shakun said she found the idea of *Minmini* absolutely fascinating. She wanted to know how the network got feedback.

Sarala responded by saying that they were using Frontline SMS which goes through the computer. Still, it is a cost and needs to be kept as low as possible. An idea was that maybe in 5 years, advertising to get sponsors can be considered, but the network was experimental at the moment. The team was right now still exploring how to build the network while it still was not registered. Twitter was also being used to send out the SMSes for free.

In terms of feedback, what was important was the human element. To encourage women to send news, to recognise news, required constant engagement and discussion. So the team calls and keeps in touch with its members. Interaction was further increased by adding conversational elements, for example in the serial, at the end of the SMS it is added that "if you want to comment on it, or if you want to share something with that woman or about that issue, SMS us back".

Desiree responded to Lisa's comment and said that gender mainstreaming has become more about assimilating, absorbing and watering down which could be disruptive. Additionally, she



wondered – with so much debate about how one needs to question knowledge and the form that it has taken and because the speakers have been talking about things like 'breaking news' and so on, to what extent are these new spaces opening up alternative knowledges.

Disha added to Desiree's question. One is aware of the language that the knowledge is being produced in and language hierarchies in the network society especially in the context of Binitha's presentation and Sepali and Sarala's about new media and sort of community based media at the local level and hierarchies between local language content and the mainstream language in that area. Like Hindi or Tamil, and English which is an even more powerful language. So how do grassroots media producers when they are engaging in new media productions, navigate these different hierarchies and those could be in terms of the writing and the content that is produced, in terms of the technology and the kinds of fonts and scripts that are easier. Nirantar has done trainings for local journalists and it is easier to teach to use English fonts and scripts than the local language fonts. Working with a local language newspaper, this gap becomes even more pronounced.

Also when you want to upscale, then how does that work with the local language content. Building solidarities across networks of grassroots women or rural women that might be doing content production at the local level but also wanting to share their experiences with other local women in other regions in other areas. So how is that possible with these language hierarchies and barriers?

Binitha replied by saying that that they found that it is not simply the question of regional language and English and that even within the regional language there are hierarchies. For example, for a new entrant, it was realised that the official language is very difficult even though it is in the regional language. What has been done is, since it is about governance and one needs to understand the *Panchayati Raj Act*, we have translated it into the same regional language but in a way that women understand and reflect. Also the idea of content generation comes up especially when you contextualise it in the gender mainstreaming.

Binitha shared how she was also a part of the effort of gender mainstreaming by the state. The state planning board decided what women on the

ground really need and developed programmes. There was no consultation. The development of methodology was also undertaken in the same manner. This resulted in a distance between the trainer and the trainees. The message that went to trainees is that the gender trainer is insulated from all these hierarchies and exercises of power. This method was not actually producing any forms of collectivities outside the training hall. The second point, Binitha made was that while designing the *Gramamukhya* website, the group began developing its own language. So the expectation is that over a period of time, material that has been generated within the platform can inform the policy formation, particularly in the language in which it can be written and sent to women.

Oi Wan replied that the alternative, is very contextual. In the case of China, it was an alternative to political propaganda. Some of the women activists used their camera to record what was happening in the grassroots, showed the reality of the earthquake and also provided alternatives to the censorship. The use of imagination, she felt, was very important and this was evident in that fact that story telling was becoming a popular form. For example, an imagined dialogue between two people and three lines of satire reflecting on the situation in China. The stories are exciting and are highly circulated. There are also satire videos that circulate on the web. Oi Wan said her organisation was also exploring alternative forms in order to create a diverse public sphere.

Binitha responded to Disha's question of upscaling and solidarity building across different women who do not understand or speak the regional language by sharing that currently they were focussing only on women who speak the regional language and women on the ground. Their priority was that those women should learn to deal with women in universities and women in power.

Sepali added that gender mainstreaming was limited, where in the case of the state policy on introducing *Nenasalas* and making it available was mainstreaming, it did not take into account women's access to technology.

Sarala added that the questions regarding language hierarchies and news were interesting for their own understanding of news. Earlier they had very few people sending news because

women thought it had to be 'breaking news' or something related to violence against women. Those were the only two categories they knew as news. It took a lot of discussion to break that mindset and assure them that just women's lives are interesting and important to be shared. Several workshops were held around that issue in addition to skill building classes where elements of news were discussed. Workshops were also held to discuss what is valid knowledge and the importance of sharing some aspects of your life.

Srilatha added that she felt a key goal in terms of gender justice movement is when women's 'invented spaces' slowly overtime become 'invited spaces' for others. For the state, for the

other civil society actors and sometimes even private sector actors. We tend to talk about those two spaces as always women going in as invitees to other people's spaces and the 'invented spaces' somehow being their own, which of course they have to be, but an indicator, an interesting way of measuring the progress towards gender justice is to see when others start wanting to be invited into your space. This implies you have become politically significant enough for others to seek that engagement.

Lisa ended the session by saying that she felt that was an interesting comment but that women might be risking a safe place by inviting others.