

Feminist Frameworks in the Information Society

We seem to be seeing a marked shift in the perception of Southern feminists about technology with a keener interest amongst them to make sense of the phenomenon of the network society as a paradigm of social interaction and institutional change. This has been bolstered inter alia, by a series of events across the globe such as in the Arab world where the popular interest in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for mobilisation and organising have unpeeled new meanings of technology – beyond their use as tools – as harbingers of social and institutional change. Closer home, it seems that feminist practitioners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on women's empowerment are less sceptical and more eager to know how exactly there may be a socio-politically aware way by which their objectives can be guided by digital technologies. Also, there is a clear movement to be informed about the pros and cons of how technology implicates citizenship, in relation to governmental policies and programmes like the Unique Identification Number (UID).

This shift in perception has facilitated our work considerably in terms of the goodwill it has generated from a community of scholars and activists keen to be with us in the exploration around and dialogues about digital technologies and gender. Our attempt through the 'Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society' (CITIGEN) research programme has been to incorporate in this early period of deep scrutiny of the network society, the concerns of marginalised women, especially from the South. In addition, we aim to build alternate frameworks of their participation in this evolving paradigm of the information society that are rooted in feminist ethics. We are also hopeful that our presence in the field of social change itself is a force, albeit small, that adds power to feminist critical reflection about and active engagement with the techno-social.

This year has seen three major efforts in the domain of gender. The CITIGEN research project was established and has traversed a journey more or less spontaneously, adapting its vision to opportunities that presented themselves. We have also explored the discourse around economic policy, gender and ICTs through a study in Kerala and Karnataka – the Women's Enterprise and Information Technology (WE-IT) research project. Our field intervention, *Mahiti Manthana* (MM), has now completed six years and recognising the uniqueness of the endeavour, we wanted to embark on two efforts, both of which are ongoing – an impact assessment study and a capturing of the experiment through personalised narratives of the team that implemented the project. Additionally, we have, through publications, papers, seminars and conferences, hoped to enrich and support, local and global networks in the sector.

Research

Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society Research Programme

In 2010, IT for Change (ITfC), with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), started a two-year small grants programme to support creative research projects across Asia. The CITIGEN programme aims to explore how the concept of citizenship may be useful to study the gendered context of the emerging techno-social paradigm. It was felt

that the opportunities and challenges for women's equality and empowerment in the emerging context needed to be framed in a nuanced way, juxtaposing the analysis of gender relations with the broader questions of development, participation and power. The programme is thus an attempt to build a theoretical framework and generate policy directions from the standpoint of marginalised women in the region (although the CITIGEN space has welcomed cross-regional dialogues, and its contention is that what is relevant for Asia may be very useful for explorations elsewhere). It will broaden the conceptual

It has been a fascinating experience to be involved in the CITIGEN programme. I have learnt an enormous amount from the research, and from the exciting discussions that we had in Delhi when we came together to consider emerging themes and issues arising from the research projects. It has made me all the more aware of the complexities of activist engagement with new media, as well as opening up a world of new possibilities and experiences. The programme has achieved a lot. I look forward to seeing the work move towards completion, and to the insights and lessons that will undoubtedly come out of it.

Andrea Cornwall, Professor,
University of Sussex,
United Kingdom

IT for Change treads on areas that have few established pathways. The firm conviction of the founders in feminism, belief that IT-enabled communication is a powerful tool and their commitment to transparency and accountability has led them to take on ambitious interventions in which the community, and women in particular, remain centre stage.

Jahnvi Andharia, Senior
Programme Officer, Sir
Dorabji Tata Trust and
Founding Member,
ANANDI, India

horizon about gender and ICTs towards a politicisation and radicalisation of the 'access-centred' discourse so that the core feminist question about power, justice and equity can be addressed in its complexity.

The previous year saw the fine tuning of the proposal to IDRC and the designing of the contours of the programme. Processes and structures were set up to launch the programme and we undertook scoping visits in selected Asian countries. By June 2010, after a call for proposals, an advisory group consisting of Andrea Cornwall (Professor, University of Sussex), Lisa McLaughlin (Associate Professor, Miami University, USA), Srilatha Batliwala (Association for Women's Rights in Development, India), and Parminder Jeet Singh (Executive Director, ITfC), assisted by Anita Gurumurthy, coordinator of the programme, selected seven projects, out of 34 submissions, that met the different criteria adequately, representing different but complementary research issues. The seven potential partners were then invited to a workshop in July 2010 to discuss the substance and methodology of the proposed research programme, kickstart the process, and clarify the values and assumptions informing ITfC's orientation to this process. The workshop report is available at: www.gender-is-citizenship.net/resources/Workshop%20report_final.pdf.

Fully developed proposals were then solicited and contracts were signed with six partners – the Women and Media Centre – Sri Lanka (principal researcher – Sepali Kottegoda), Hong Kong Inmedia – Hong Kong (principal researcher – Ip Iam Chong), Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) – Thailand (principal researcher – Hsiao Chuan Hsia), Likhuan – Philippines (principal researcher – Sylvia Estrada Claudio), the Indian Institute of Technology Madras – India (principal researcher – Binitha Thampi) and D.Net – Bangladesh (principal researcher – Ananya Raihan). The network has emerged as a unique discursive space for two reasons; all the teams are in active engagement with techno-social practices either through action research or through ongoing dialogue with feminist organisations and groups. The State of the Art (SOA) papers, the first scoping documents which map the gendered context pertaining to the research, are now available on www.gender-is-citizenship.net/SOA. The second reason is that CITIGEN has become

a space for feminist leaders and scholars not only from Asia, but also from other parts of the world, to elaborate the issues around gender, network society and power, through their own unique and varied theoretical legacies and methodological orientations. To accommodate this eclecticism to enrich the research programme, we also decided to make room for think pieces – shorter works to complement the empirical research.

Prominent scholars and practitioners have joined the network as think piece authors. Farida Shaheed (Director of Research in Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan), Supinya Klangnarong (vice-chair of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, Thailand), Margarita Salas (independent consultant, Costa Rica), Heike Jensen (independent gender researcher and consultant, Germany) and Desiree Lewis (Associate Professor, University of the Western Cape, South Africa) are studying the intersections between the micro-context of community information ecologies and macro socio-political phenomena. We are happy that two think pieces are now published. They raise pertinent questions around both the neoliberal and patriarchal structures mediating power in the information society. You can find them at <http://gender-is-citizenship.net/thinkpieces>.

In April 2011, we organised a three-day Review Workshop in New Delhi, to take stock of the CITIGEN process. The workshop's objective was to facilitate the articulation of emerging concepts and tentative theories from the ongoing work in CITIGEN. We also felt that it would be good to have a few external scholars to debate with us on the larger questions of democratic structures and institutions, and their shifting meanings for marginalised women's participation in the information society as equal citizens. The workshop report, a knowledge in itself, is available at: www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/CITIGEN_Workshop%20Report.pdf.

We are keen that CITIGEN should be instrumental in informing both feminist debates at the global policy level, and strategies at the local level. By the end of 2011, research partners will submit their final research reports, and we hope to close the project by early 2012, hopefully having sown the seeds for the different constituent endeavours of the programme to proceed on their respective pathways.

Mahiti Manthana Research

Prakriye – Centre for Community Informatics and Development, the field unit of ITfC, has taken forward the MM – literally translated as 'information churning' – project, even after funding support from the Government of India (GoI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had ended. The MM project attempts to harness the potential of ICTs in furthering the impact of an existing women's empowerment intervention, *Mahila Samakhyā* Karnataka (MSK), an ongoing pan-Indian government programme working towards mobilising women from disadvantaged sections in rural areas through village level *sanghas* (collectives). In the long run, MSK hopes to move these collectives towards greater autonomy by gradually withdrawing programmatic resource support. MM seeks to contribute to MSK's goals by deploying ICTs to strengthen the existing information and communication processes of MSK. The project has three main components: a weekly radio programme, video-based learning platforms and *sangha*-managed telecentres in the villages.

In order to ensure that MM's ways of understanding, interpreting and 'doing' technology can be theorised, and as a means of revisiting the impact of the project through robust research methods, we initiated a research study on the MM project. The research study had two main objectives: assessing the impact of MM on the organisational structure and processes of MSK; and generating insights for building a theoretical framework to map the inter-relationships between development, community informatics and gender dynamics. Between October 2010 and March 2011, we completed the field work which comprised extensive interviews with women members of MSK *sanghas* in the geographical areas covered by the MM project, and conducted interviews with the team/employees of MSK. The interviewees were selected through a judgement sampling process and included three categories – women with no exposure or knowledge of the three components of the project (community radio, video and telecentres); women who were exposed only to the radio and video components introduced by the MM project; and finally, women who were exposed to all the three components.



The CITIGEN network at the Review Workshop (New Delhi, India)

The MM project has managed to carve out a local public sphere that is an alternative to the dominant public sphere where the voices of marginalised women can be heard, even if to a limited extent. Amongst *sangha* women, processes of peer-to-peer and self-determined learning, as well as of confidence in engaging with officials, have been generated over a period of time. The impact study hopes to systematically examine the extent to which these experiential impressions are indeed a fair reflection of the reality on the ground. This year, we look forward to analysing the findings of the research.

MM has been a special journey for us and has been the foundation stone of our received wisdom on undertaking development activity through community informatics. The team that has been part of this process has authored their reflections in the continuing journey to use and be led by digital possibilities. These reflections are currently being compiled as diaries that we feel will be of immense value to teachers and students of media, women's studies, as well as development studies, and to practitioners and scholars.

Women's Enterprise and Information Technology

The possibility of a research project on Women's Enterprise and Information Technology (WE-IT), in partnership with Dr. Lisa McLaughlin from Miami University, Ohio (United States), was flagged in last year's annual report. The research has progressed at a steady pace in the last one year. Broadly, the study aims at exploring the structural-institutional facets of the relationship between women entrepreneurs

The CITIGEN project is an extremely holistic programme that goes beyond research, including elements that considerably raise the impact of the research: especially the updated website, the regular bulletins, and a live network. The think pieces have been excellent contributions to the global contemporary feminist debate. These ideas need to be widely circulated, including in mainstream circles. The project makes critical interventions in three neglected areas: it links work on the ground with theory, bringing local experiences into theoretical frameworks; it builds a strong body of work from across Asia and the global South; and finally, it pushes feminists of different generations to engage with and respond to the concerns of the information age.

Manjima Bhattacharya,
Jagori, India

From early 2010 to the present, it has been my great fortune to collaborate with IT for Change in working on two gender and information society projects: as an advisor for the Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society programme, and as a research collaborator in the Women Enterprise and Information Technology project. Critically, each of these programmes engages with the experiences of women who most often have been treated as 'targets', rather than 'subjects', of development. I have no doubt that both projects will yield results that have a ripple effect in influencing perspectives and practices oriented to enhancing gender equity and social justice beyond their respective research scopes.

Dr. Lisa McLaughlin,
Associate Professor, Miami
University–Ohio,
United States

and ICTs, examining them from the perspective of a Southern feminist. The two sites selected for the research – Karnataka and Kerala – represent two contrasting ICT eco-systems. While in Karnataka, the IT hub of India, conversations around ICTs have been largely led by big private players, Kerala has been running its ICT-related education and governance programmes as a State 'mission'.

This qualitative research study brings the voices of different actors in the ICT and women's enterprise eco-system, captured through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, together, to construct the discourse of women's economic empowerment through and in relation to ICTs. Research participants in Karnataka constituted women entrepreneurs who had been trained in ICT use by the Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Karnataka (AWAKE), an NGO that has been supporting women entrepreneurs for the past two decades. In Kerala, we interviewed women entrepreneurs who have been trained under various state-led programmes for e-literacy and entrepreneurship, like the famous *Akshaya* programme. In both states, the views of government representatives from the departments of information technology and women's development were collected. These views, both in their articulation and silence, helped us uncover the State discourse.

The field work was completed by November 2010 and since then, the data has been translated and subject to analysis. This research has enabled us to take a critical look at the role of women's organisations, as well as the State, in the particular context of the digital age.

IT for Change at the seminar on 'Logging into (In)security: A Seminar on ICT and Gender Violence' (Chennai, India)



Advocacy and Networking

This year, we have continued our efforts in building alliances with feminist actors, at the local, national and global level.

Our collaboration with Vimochana, a Bengaluru-based feminist group, continued with a contribution to their collection of essays about the challenges for feminism. We wrote about the digitally transformed world, examining violence against women. This essay has also attracted attention from other groups, and we have been able to support their local awareness building efforts through our understanding of critical feminist and media theories in their contemporariness. The essay is available at www.ITforChange.net/Understanding_gender.

We have also strengthened our network with feminist scholars and activists from around the world. During Dr. Lisa McLaughlin's stay in India for the WE-IT research, we organised a talk by her about the gendered ties that bind the 'new global governance' to the 'new information economy', with a focus on women, work, and ICTs (www.ITforChange.net/Locating_Gender_Politics_Lisa). We also engaged with academic institutions, bringing perspectives from our work to different forums, such as at the 'Expert Brainstorm Workshop on Gender Stereotypes' organised by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS, Brighton, United Kingdom) for a United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW) supported process. We took part in an international conference organised by the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) dedicated to 'Gender Equity Policies – New Scenarios, Actors and Articulations' in Buenos Aires (Argentina), bringing to the table epistemological questions about production/reproduction, public/private and global/local. Our contribution is available at www.ITforChange.net/Flacso_gender_equality_knowledge. This will be part of a collection of essays coordinated by the organisers of the conference. For the tenth anniversary issue of *Feminist Media Studies*, Anita Gurumurthy discussed the degree of impact that feminism and feminist media studies have had, can have, and should have, in the global South. The article reflects the importance of investigating the local, while simultaneously acknowledging

global shifts in knowledge production and distribution (see www.ITforChange.net/FMS_Negotiating_local-global).

At events we have organised through the year, especially when we invited feminist scholars and activists, we have persistently shared our writings; to go more than half way to provoke discussions around the exciting and emerging field of gender justice and information society. For instance, an essay that we wrote about the learnings of the MM project, has been shared with partners in the CITIGEN network, and submitted to *Women in Action* (ISIS International). It has been affirming that CITIGEN's work has been further disseminated by other forums, like the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Gender-IT initiative, as well as by discussion groups such as the online dialogue organised by the Latin American group of APC, which chose the think piece on Central America, commissioned by the CITIGEN programme, to be part of the discussion on gender and ICTs in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

Mahila Samakhya (MS) is a national programme for women's empowerment of the Department of Education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, GoI) working in eleven states. The programme is funded by the GoI with additional external funding by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). It provides for monitoring mechanisms, including the provision of an annual Joint Review Mission (JRM). ITfC was invited by the Ministry to lead the JRM this year, at a time where the review is expected to guide the overall direction of the core idea of MS in the coming five year Plan period. The MS programme has been running for two decades, and seeks to address the needs and interests of socially and economically marginalised women, using an 'education-for-empowerment' approach, where education is interpreted in its broadest sense of a journey towards full citizenship. Our participation in the review was also a means to shape the idea of a 'resource strategy' for the programme. As it expands and deepens its impact, it would be necessary to optimise the programme's efforts by developing appropriate



Panel presentation at the CITIGEN Review Workshop (New Delhi, India), left to right: Anita Gurumurthy, Andrea Cornwall, Ramata Molo Thioune and Lisa McLaughlin

information, knowledge and communications processes and systems. The final report of the review therefore included an ICT-enabled information, knowledge and communication strategy for the programme. We hope that our perspectives will make their way into the 12th Five Year Plan to influence what is by far one of India's most important women's empowerment interventions.

Looking Ahead

The upcoming year will be a time to take the results of our analysis into deeper synthesis – writing and taking our work into wider spheres of influence. In the months ahead, we hope to complete the MM research analysis and publish the report. MM is perhaps one of the few instances of ICT interventions that have adopted a feminist information society framework, and we need to spell out what its constituent elements are and invite a wider critique from engaged feminists. As for the WE-IT research, the emerging perspectives will inform our future advocacy efforts at the national level. We hope to be able to sustain the momentum around CITIGEN – the global interest it has generated among progressive feminist scholars and practitioners in the issues of membership and marginality, participation and exclusion, as the network age reshapes gender power. Perhaps we will be able to make a dent in the way global policy bodies and significant donor agencies like UNWomen think about women's empowerment in the digital era. Keeping ourselves relevant to the immediate neighbourhood will also be important, and so we would like to pursue our growing engagement with feminist practitioners and NGOs in Karnataka.