

# Feminist Frameworks in Information Society

*The gender discourse in relation to ICTs has been caught in an impasse-feminists from the South believe it to be part of a fringe arena dealing with methodologies of practice. Of course, more and more southern feminists are able to see the potential of technology for building alliances and networking, again, as a tool that has enabled a new means to connect. It is not as if these perceptions are incorrect. But there is in this analytic, a tendency to ignore the more structural and theoretical frameworks that can recast in feminist understanding the 'ICTs as tools' approach into 'the information society as a paradigm' approach. The work that is underway in the field, initiated by feminist actors who want to interpret ICTs and enable civil society to appropriate its power is indeed invaluable. But what we have been trying to do is to create a simultaneous appreciation of how ICTs are not just tools or artefacts but a phenomenon that can transform social institutions and processes. We want to be able to show how just like globalisation is used by feminists as a category of analysis, information society too needs to be one such epistemological category. This shift in perspective that we have attempted has been through many strategies - from writing think-pieces, giving talks and doing research to simply engaging with people one on one. The need to reinvigorate older development debates by subjecting them to fresh analysis in relation to the emerging techno-social order and its dominant ideologies of market fundamentalism and libertarian individualism cannot be overemphasised.*

In the arena of change-making, visioning a strategy that has the backing of a sound theory needs more than goal-setting for the future. It requires a solid appraisal of the present and an entrepreneurial instinct to negotiate the tiny twists and big turns to get to the future. Our work in the area of gender has entailed theory-building and research as well as the design and practice of feminist approaches to doing development work with technology. While our attempt to see the parts that make the whole is an exercise that began a few years ago, we intensified our effort to create credible strategies that correspond to a southern framework on information society and women's citizenship during this year.

## Research

### ***Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society Programme***

IT for Change, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), geared up this year to institute a small grants programme to support creative research projects across Asia that address the question of women's citizenship in information society. The

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, which is one of the vital pieces of our universe of ideas and actions on feminist frameworks, a piece that provides the grounded analytical anchor. The programme will be called 'Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society' (Citigen, in short),

and it seeks to bring together a group of researchers and organisations who can engage with questions of gender and the digital public from their own contextual motivations. The programme is, for us, a means to influence the policy and practice discourses in the realm of ICTs and development. Gender will be employed as a lens to explore what has predominantly been a patriarchal and neo-liberal economic narrative and to discover the meanings reflecting the social membership of the marginalised in the new social realities co-constructed by digital technology. We do hope Citigen will broaden the conceptual horizon in the field of gender and ICTs by politicising the 'access-centred' approach that glosses over the relations of power mediating access and the complex ecology of actors controlling the techno-social space. Citigen will frame information society membership through the core feminist questions of power, justice and equity.

### Research study of Mahiti Manthana

IT for Change's Centre for Community Informatics and Development (CCID) continues to work with *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka and its *sangha* women, giving *Mahiti Manthana* a continuity beyond the duration of its funding by the Government of India and UNDP. We have been working towards enabling *Mahila Samakhya* to set up systems to become more autonomous with their ICT pathways through *Kelu Sakhi*, our radio programme, *sangha-shaale*, our video based platform and *Namma Mahiti Kendra*, our rights based approach to community telecentres. The context of our work has needed a rigorous review through qualitative research, the design of which has been a crucial priority through this year. We came up with the key research questions and have been working on the design through consultative processes that have

involved the entire team. We propose to look at various feminist theoretical frameworks combining the conceptual elements of the public sphere, empowerment, knowledge and organisational change, for our inquiry and analysis. The coming year will see the data collection and writing. We are obviously very excited to get to this phase of what started off as a tentative exploration of a practice-based idea.

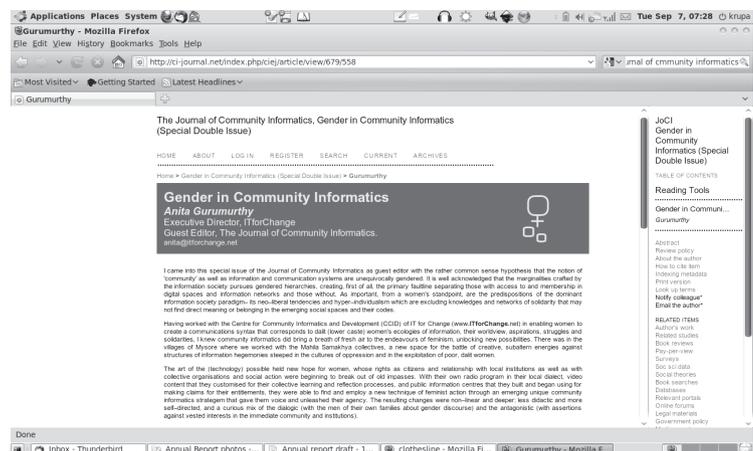
### The Journal of Community Informatics - Special Issue on Gender

IT for Change was invited to guest-edit a special issue on gender and community informatics by the *Journal of Community Informatics* (JoCI), which is a focal point for the dissemination of research on informatics and development among a global network of academicians, community informatics practitioners and national and multi-lateral policy makers. For us, the intersection between gender and community informatics has been intimately linked to our experiences with *Mahiti Manthana*, our field project. This special issue of JoCI has held a lot of learning for us. The articles in this issue address how information and communication technology has transformed gender identities and carry perspectives from across the world. The special issue explored a variety of topics ranging from e-governance approaches

For years, IT for Change has been at the forefront of linking Information Society concerns with gender equality and social justice concerns. In a nutshell, all of the core concepts evoked by "gender and citizenship in Information Society" - publics, human rights, governance - are crucial in theoretical as well as political terms, and all are currently in flux and require close scrutiny, particularly so from the vantage point of gender. I am very much looking forward to the findings produced through IT for Change's initiative regarding the Asian region.

Heike Jensen, Ph.D.,  
Postdoctoral researcher and  
lecturer, Department of  
Gender Studies of Humboldt  
University, Berlin, Germany

Editorial page of the  
special edition of  
*Journal of Community  
Informatics* edited by IT  
for Change



I would like to congratulate you for a brilliant special issue on gender and CI on the JoCI. Your editorial was one of the best texts that I have read on feminism in general and gender and CI in particular.

*Liisa Horelli, Adjunct professor, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, Helsinki University of Technology, Finland*

and gender-based exclusions, virtual spaces that nurture solidarity and collective identity, mobile phone units that empower women's entrepreneurship, and migrant women's ICT based interactions to examine the relationship between community informatics and gender dynamics. We completed our work for the journal this year and feel that the entire project has been a useful way to grasp the specifics of gender politics within fluid techno-social realities. See (<http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/issue/current>).

## Advocacy

One of our most satisfying experiences this year has been in the area of alliance-building with feminist actors – local and global. With feminist groups like Vimochana and Jagori, we have worked to build the capacity and awareness among civil society scholars and activists to interpret information society changes through structural analyses. We co-organised consultations and seminars around new media, new technology, gender and development. These efforts presented organisations and activists with new tools and categories to reflect upon and understand change processes with their gendered implications at macro levels and in their continuities with micro realities. We have engaged with academic institutions through lectures and debates that allow a re-examination of the current priorities in relation to the structural changes of information society and the crisis of categories for feminist intervention.

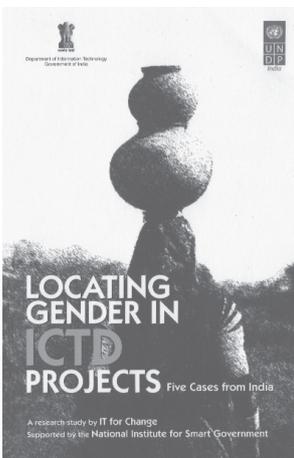
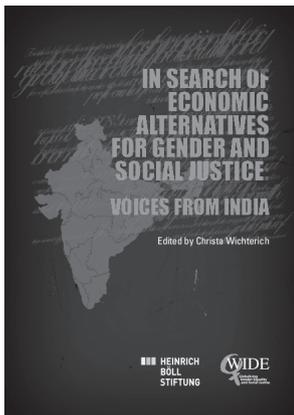
(See for example, <http://www.itforchange.net/gender/72-gender/252-it-for-changes-gender-program-in-malaysia-.html>)

Given the rich tradition of southern scholarship on gender and development in India, the inroads our work has made

into southern feminist framework building initiatives is a testimony to the resonance that our theoretical approaches have with political thinking among veterans in the field. We wrote a piece for a book titled, 'In Search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India', an Heinrich Böll Foundation initiative. Our article, 'Reclaiming Development in the Information Society', argued how feminist analysis must focus on the spaces of resistance to transnational capital accumulation in information society, by emphasising the collaborative over the competitive. (<http://www.itforchange.net/gender/72-gender/263-voices-india.html>)

Last year, we elaborated a policy framework on gender and ICTs based on a citizenship approach for the UN's Global Alliance on ICTs and Development (GAID). We were able to continue refining this approach to examine debates on Internet Governance along the lines of citizenship. We organised a workshop on this theme at the UN's Internet Governance Forum (UNIGF), held in Egypt in November 2009, inviting scholars and activists to explore the intersections between citizenship, gender and the Internet ([www.itforchange.net/gender/72-gender/245-igf2009.html](http://www.itforchange.net/gender/72-gender/245-igf2009.html)). National ICTD agencies like the National Institute for Smart Government (NISG), have called upon our gender-related expertise, and we were able to publish this year, the research supported by NISG to engender national ICTD programmes through policy interventions (<http://www.itforchange.net/gender/72-gender/262-gender-in-ictd.html>).

We contributed a commentary to the *Economic and Political Weekly's* September 2009 issue in an attempt to advance the



policy debates around gender and ICTs. We argued that policies on gender need to avoid a paternalistic and alarmist tendency that treat the techno-social space as essentially dangerous and that policy makers must look at laws and policies in a holistic way to ensure the citizenship and capability rights of women.

Mainstream development agencies are now waking up to the implications of information society analyses. The UN's regional commission for the Asia-Pacific, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), invited us to give expert comments on Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action towards the upcoming Beijing plus 15 review in 2010. Our paper for ESCAP ([www.itforchange.net/media/The\\_Information\\_Society\\_Context-Paper\\_for\\_UNESCAP%20.pdf](http://www.itforchange.net/media/The_Information_Society_Context-Paper_for_UNESCAP%20.pdf)) has been widely acclaimed by feminist groups for breaking new ground on media, violence, ICTD and access to knowledge. The BRIDGE group at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sussex, invited us to talk about e-governance and technology governance in a seminar on gender and governance. These invitations from different agencies to expand the gender and development analyses and discussions has been an encouraging indicator of our impact.

## Looking Ahead

The research programme on 'Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society' that we have just launched is an effort to bring together a small community of researchers who can use the lens of citizenship to study information society from a gender and development perspective. The coming year will see an intensive engagement with this programme, the setting up of the research network and the ongoing advocacy through it.

In the months ahead, we plan to focus on data collection in Mysore, to study our intervention through *Mahiti Manthana*. We look forward to investigating the way our experiment has intertwined with the market-led diffusion of ICTs on the ground, and to be able to comment on what we did and how our efforts to approach technology use in a self-reflexive and feminist way may have created a different dynamic of community informatics.

For a few months, we have been discussing a partnership with Dr. Lisa McLaughlin from Miami University-Ohio, to undertake research with a political economy framework on 'Women's Enterprise and Information Technology'. We begin the coming year with the data collection for this research. We will explore ICT policies and practices that seek to integrate women entrepreneurs, especially from the informal and small business sectors, into formal and global markets, looking at both women in IT businesses and women using IT for their businesses. Three sites have been selected for the research - Karnataka, Kerala and Gujarat. In Karnataka, we will meet women entrepreneurs supported by an NGO called the Association of Women's Entrepreneurs of Karnataka (AWAKE) that works with women from across different social backgrounds to set up and run small enterprises. In Kerala, we will study the efforts of the IT Mission and Kudumbashree programme (both are initiatives of the Government of Kerala), looking at how ICT-based entrepreneurship schemes have been functioning and whether and how it empowers women. We also want to study how the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the women's trade union in Gujarat, has deployed ICTs to support their women members.

Often enough the topic of gender and ICTs is only seen from a rather instrumental perspective, but this panel stepped away from that commonplace to ask a much deeper question: How is internet empowering women's citizenship? In our patriarchal reality we rarely think of women as active citizens, with power and the will to participate in shaping the world.

*Margarita Salas, Founder of Sulá Batsú Cooperative, Co-hosted the workshop 'The Internet and Citizenship: Applying a Gender Lens' with IT for Change at the IGF 2009 Meeting in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt*