



DRAFT PAPER

## Women and New Media in the Margins of the Sri Lankan State

Sepali Kottegoda, Sitralega Maunaguru,  
Sachini Perera and Sarala Emmanuel  
Sri Lanka



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## Executive summary

Women's engagement with new media has not been adequately documented in Sri Lanka. This is clearly an 'emerging' area of knowledge both in terms of access to and use of technology by women. From a feminist social sciences perspective, there is a need for an exploration of the understanding and practice of citizenship as articulated by women using new media. This study helps to reveal the possibilities for women's practice of citizenship in Sri Lanka, and the potential for new media to be effectively utilised in promoting and enabling women's full participation as citizens. This is an important dimension to document, especially in the context of challenges that women have faced in becoming visible in political discourses through mainstream media.

This research study explored women's engagement with new media through several different forums. The study focused on women bloggers in local languages (in Sinhala and in Tamil), the use of blogs by a women's organisation as part of a media campaign to increase nominations of women in local government elections, the experiences of rural women's access and use of ICTs through the government-led *nenasala* programmes, and the use of SMS based news sharing by rural women.

One of the key findings of this study has been that, it is women's access to and control of technologies in creating content of media messages and, women's activism and collective engagement in new media avenues which has supported a transformative process in their exercise of citizenship. As Gurusurthy and Singh (2010)<sup>1</sup> argue, information technologies create and expand public domains and create a means for asserting identities and group rights, particularly placing women's interests in the centre. However enabling structural change and political will become crucial to bringing about transformation in experiences of women's citizenship (Gurusurthy and Singh 2010).

## Gender impact of policies

The e-Sri Lanka policy of 2002 was drafted in gender neutral terms. This initiative to promote the use of ICT for development does include empowerment of women as a focus area, but they are included with youth, reflecting the underlying insensitivity to the gendered differences in access to ICT in general. Ideally, a gender analysis needs to be integrated in the overall processes that lead to the adoption of key policy initiatives. There has also not been much articulation of the strategic use of ICTs for the empowerment of women by national policies and bodies that have targeted women.

The policy framework falls short of recognising the fact that information gate-keeping is always mediated by existing socio-cultural relationships that may impede the engagement of all sectors and communities in accessing and using electronic media. For example, particularly in the South Asian context, it is most likely that this mediation takes place where local patriarchal norms of social engagement within families and in communities mediate women's access to public information. This control is determined by caste, religion, ethnicity, income, education, age etc. To overcome these barriers, it is important not only to provide the technology but also to mobilise women and other marginalised persons to be aware of their right to information as well as to skills to be able to access information regarding health, livelihoods, markets, news, culture etc. Therefore state institutions such as the Ministry for Women Empowerment and the Ministry of Mass Media and Information have a vital role to play in mobilizing women to access, control and create content in

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<sup>1</sup> Gurusurthy, A & Singh, P (2010), "Reclaiming Development in the Information Society" in Christa Wichterich (ed), *In Search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India*, WIDE Belgium

relation to ICTs.

The key policy implications from this research are that even though ICTs are available it did not mean that access was ensured to women and girls. In some of the *nenasala* centres girls were sent to the centres only if women operators were there and the space was seen as safe. Women and girls use of these centres depended on social norms of 'accepted' behaviour for women and girls; there were reports that young women were stopped by their families because there was 'talk' about them mixing with boys at the centres. In the focus group discussions at the Eastern University in Sri Lanka, women mentioned that it would be good if there were women only internet cafés

This study also documents the process of women using new media in their campaigns for local government elections in five districts. As this study notes, most of the strategies used by these women including the new media forums did not have a substantial impact on changing patriarchal power structures that obstructed women from being nominated by political parties let alone winning. The Women and Media Collective blog for the Local Government election campaign for women in the five districts featured 180 women candidates and, their articulation of their own campaigns and their experiences of using new media. These inputs are now very useful sources for future comprehensive advocacy strategies for other elections that institutions such as the Ministry of Women Empowerment..

### **ICT as public utility**

The study also included discussions with young female students in the Batticaloa segment of the research. The students noted that even though their school had computers they did not have internet access as the school could not afford to pay for the services of a private internet service provider. This leads to an important policy recommendation – that *access to ICTs must be ensured as a public utility*. This is particularly important for rural marginalised communities. The access to ICTs cannot be seen only through a business model, but as a key component of development planning. Public information infrastructure can be responsive to marginalised women and the poor, whereas private ICT approaches would not target these groups per se. Studies done in South Asia have shown that private sector led approaches have not increased poor people's access to services (Swamy, 2008<sup>2</sup>).

### **Privacy and security**

Another important policy implication is that women and girls (and indeed men) should be made aware of issues around internet security and privacy and the real risks for women and girls with regard to violence through ICTs. This aspect is discussed in the research report in relation to women bloggers.

For the women involved in the SMS news network, the creation, control and access to news was very empowering. The technology enabled women to move through barriers to mobility, power hierarchies and access to information. It was also creating a new social collective – or a new techno-social reality that was engaging with traditional boundaries of space – media space, knowledge spaces and geographic space. In terms of the actual news, in some instances women were able to use the knowledge for transformative action – sometimes this took the form of individual women exercising their rights, for example a mother approaching the Foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Swamy, M (2008), "ICTs and Women's Empowerment: Findings from South Asia" in An Empowerment Approach to Gender Equality in the Information Society, Regional Analysis from Asia, IT for Change

Employment Bureau office in the Batticaloa Town after receiving information about the process through the SMS news network, and succeeding in getting her daughter back home from the Middle East after months of not having contact with her - and at other times where analysis provided by the SMS news network was used for higher level advocacy at the district level.

### ***ICTs and violence against women***

With the boundaries of the 'public' domain being transformed through ICTs, the need for a 'digital personhood' was recently defined by German Law in terms of privacy online. This is in recognition of integrity and dignity of persons in online public spaces. Recent studies have shown that the intrusion into people's privacy is very gendered<sup>3</sup>. Hughes (2002<sup>4</sup>) documents how newsgroups enable exchange of information on how to local and sexually exploit women, chat rooms being used as spaces for child sexual abuse, file swapping programmes that enable dissemination of pornographic material etc .

There is an urgent need for a deeper discussion on how ICTs have been used to further victimise women and girls in terms of violence and harassment. A common phenomenon has been cyber stalking – such as undetected surveillance, eavesdropping, e mail tampering, using hidden GPS tracking devices and new video capabilities. Use of MMS to circulate private sexual images of women through phones, 'sexting', pornography and human trafficking being the extreme examples of the use of ICT for violence against women<sup>5</sup>.

These intrusions necessarily call for a multi tiered response to violence against women through ICTs. This would not only be about state regulation and censorship, but also about self-regulation by the industries themselves. More importantly there should be education on self protection and privacy for women as well as the creation of counter-discourses – a good example of this is the BC Rural Women's Network sponsored Online Safety Toolkit<sup>6</sup>.

Sri Lanka's IT regulations mainly focus on commerce and governance. The research study clearly argues for the development of comprehensive policy by state institutions for women, such as the Ministry of Women Empowerment as well as other feminist and gender-aware think tanks on how to be responsive to the concerns of violence against women through ICTs *without resorting to protectionist control and increased use of surveillance technologies that constrain and restrict the exercise of the rights of women's citizenship*. It is important to generate knowledge, resources and helplines for women on how to protect themselves when using ICTs.

In the e Government policy(2009<sup>7</sup>) there is only one section which addresses the issue of gender based violence through ICTs in terms of government work, and this is with regard to the section on e mail communications which reads -

“Content that is obscene, misleading or offensive to any ethnic group, gender, accepted religion,

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<sup>3</sup> Anita Gurumurthy et al (2009) for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific on “Recasting the Beijing Platform for Action Through the Information Society Lens”

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, D (2002), The Use of New Communications and Information Technologies for Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children, Hastings Law Journal, 13(1): 129-148

<sup>5</sup>The Report to the European Parliament by the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities (2004)

<sup>6</sup> Gurumurthy et al (2009)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.icta.lk/index.php/en/e-gouvernement-policy>

culture or to any tradition of Sri Lanka should not be sent out, and any form of harassment should not be carried out using emails on the organization's domain" (e Government Policy page 21).

However this is only in relation to government communications and it does not state what the penalty of such acts would be, or how it can be reported.

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**January 2012**

**Sepali Kottegoda, Sitralega Maunaguru, Sachini Perera and Sarala Emmanuel**

**Sri Lanka**

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## **Background**

### Sri Lanka: context

Sri Lanka presents itself as a country in South Asia that has high ‘social development’ indicators; both girls and boys have access to free education provided by the State from primary to university level; an extensive network of health services across the country ensures that the majority of its population have access to basic health care. In the context of the ethnic conflict, many areas in the North and East were often without continuous access to these services which deprived the population living in these areas access to basic services. With an end to the war, it is expected that access to services and resources and the development dividend will be universally available.

The distribution of women within key economic social and political spheres, however, indicate that clear differences in women’s access to resources and to avenues of decision making which constrain the full realisation of their rights whether in the South or in the conflict affected North and East. For example, in 2009, the estimated population of Sri Lanka was 20.2 million of which almost 52% was female. Out of a total labour force of 8.1 million, 2.9 million or 34.3% was female. Given that the current definitions of ‘work’ and of ‘economically active’ exclude housework done primarily by women in the home, only 36% of women in the labour force are deemed to be economically active while approximately 64% are categorised as economically inactive.<sup>8</sup> Further, the unemployment rate is double for women (4.4 for men and 8.6 for women). Significantly, educated unemployment is recorded to be higher among women compared to men<sup>9</sup>. Data on women’s participation and representation in the political arena and the high prevalence of structural and social violence against women, for example, place Sri Lanka’s ‘achievements’ in a critical perspective and belie international measurement of women’s empowerment such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG Goal 3)<sup>10</sup>.

Sri Lankan women continue to face challenges in relation to ensuring State compliance with international treaties and conventions such as the full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination on Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). An outcome of almost three decades of war has significantly changed household and family structures with an unprecedented increase in the number of female headed households to approximately 24% of the population. Such changes together with the demographic structure of the country, which consists of an ageing population, combined with a 52% component of females, signal an urgent need to address the concerns of women across age groups.

The fast changing economic, social and cultural environment also highlights changing perceptions and articulations of social norms relating to sexuality in general and to gender and sexual identities in particular. The emergence of women as decision makers at the level of the single parent household together with women’s visibility in the wider socio-economic arenas provide a platform to examine and relate these new identities and relationships towards furthering dialogue and debate on facilitating better policy and particularly practice for women’s rights in the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Census and Statistics. Ministry of Finance and Planning. (2009). Quarterly Report of the Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics. Excluding Northern Province. Colombo.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Census and Statistics.(2009). Bulletin of Labour Statistics of Sri Lanka. Colombo.

<sup>10</sup> UNECOSOC Committee of Experts on Public Administration (2010) *Information and communications technology and gender equality: new opportunities and challenges for public administration to implement the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals*.

Non-Governmental Organisations remain marginalised in access to mainstream media in general, and in relation to the expression of critical perspectives on socio-economic and political aspects of women's lives and on gender based differences. At the same time, new media is opening up avenues that are being keenly grasped especially by the younger generation. New media is allowing for explorations in mass communications in terms of content as well as of form. Most exciting in this field is the increasing interest in using new media among women's organisations both in urban and non urban areas, in the South as well as in the North and the East. This lends itself to aspects of technological skills development as well as in the development of novel perspectives by women for advocacy on women's rights. However, new media in itself brings out the complexities of who can or who does use it, for what purpose is it used, where does access and use increase or be subject to monitoring and control.

This research study explored women's engagement with new media through several different forums. We focused on local language women bloggers, the use of blogs for campaigning for the increase of women's nominations in local government elections, experiences of rural women's access and use of ICTs through the government lead *nenasala* programmes, and rural women using SMS based news sharing. One of the key findings of this study has been that, where new media has been transformative in terms of women's citizenship, it has been due to women having control of technologies, where women were creating content and where there was a collective consciousness and activism. Gurumurthy and Singh (2010)<sup>11</sup> also argue that information technologies create and expand public domains and create a means for asserting identities and group rights, particularly placing women's interests in the centre. However, enabling structural change and political will become crucial to bringing about transformation in experiences of women's citizenship.

This study documented the process of women using new media in their campaigns for local government elections in five districts. As this study notes, most of the strategies used by these women including the new media forums did not have a substantial impact on changing patriarchal power structures that obstructed women from being nominated by political parties let alone winning. However, the learning from this engagement is rich and should be used by key actors such as the Ministry for Women Empowerment to consolidate their work on increasing women's representation in politics. The blog featured 180 women candidates from the five districts. Their articulation of their own campaigns and their experiences of using new media can be consolidated to plan a bigger advocacy strategy by the Ministry of Women Empowerment targeting the next elections.

The e-Sri Lanka policy was drafted in gender neutral terms. This initiative to promote the use of ICT for development does include empowerment of women, but they are included with youth, reflecting the underlying insensitivity to the gendered differences in access to ICT in general. Ideally, a gender analysis needs to be integrated in the overall processes that lead to the adoption of key policy initiatives; however, this does not appear to have taken place. There has also not been much articulation of the strategic use of ICTs for the empowerment of women by national policies and bodies that have targeted women.

### ICT access and use in Sri Lanka

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<sup>11</sup> Gurumurthy, A & Singh, P (2010), "Reclaiming Development in the Information Society" in Christa Wichterich (ed), *In Search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India*, WIDE Belgium



Globally it has been the case that women's involvement in technology development and use has been very low. For example in the USA 38%, Brazil 25%, China 7%, and Arab States 1%. Therefore, even though there is great potential in ICTs, other social and cultural dimensions play a role in women's ability to exercise their rights in this domain. A study done by Hafkin<sup>12</sup> found that female internet usage is higher in countries that are more gender equal, countries in which human development indicators are high and countries which are high in technological development. There was also correlation between the Gender Empowerment Index and female internet users. Sri Lanka's position in terms of development indicators is higher than most countries in the region. Sri Lanka's GDI rank is 99 (India being 113, Bangladesh 121, Pakistan 125, Nepal 128). However, the use of ICTs by women is extremely low. Therefore, there is a need for a significant programme to be put in place to enable women to engage with ICTs not only in relation to access but also as a means through which women exercise their citizenship rights. The studies discussed below indicate that women had access to internet to a certain extent (mainly through work) but used the internet mainly as a source of information. This study also highlighted the gendered social controls that influenced women and girl's access to the computer and the internet. The real spaces where the technology was located was governed very much by patriarchal social norms. Young girls interviewed in Batticaloa noted that they dropped out of computer classes as there was talk about boys and girls 'mixing' in these centres which then made their families stop them from going. New ICTs have also provided new employment opportunities for women, however this has been highly problematic in terms of women's exploitation and increased vulnerabilities in these new arenas of work (Jayaweera et al 2006)<sup>13</sup>.

In Sri Lanka there has been several studies regarding the access to and use of ICTs. The study done by Jayaweera et al in 2006<sup>14</sup> noted that more young women than men tended to use internet cafés. Women usually accessed the internet from work. Around a quarter of the respondents accessed the internet in their homes. A larger percentage of users accessed educational material, followed by general information and entertainment. However, awareness about services such as email and internet was high only among Colombo affluent and middle class parents and parents in Jaffna district. Tele shops and cyber cafés were rare in the rural environment. Tele shop services were used by 30% men and 19% women<sup>15</sup>.

A more recent national study done by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in 2009<sup>16</sup>, noted that in the period 2004-2009, computer ownership within households had increased in all the provinces. On average, 1 in every 10 households owned a computer. However, the majority of computers were owned in the urban sector (23.6%) with only 3.1% of computer ownership in the rural sectors of Sri Lanka. In terms of usage of internet and e-mail, the study indicated that only 13% of the population had used internet in the previous 12 months and only 12% of the population had used email in the previous 12 months. There was no gender breakdown in this study about this usage.

The DCS study also noted that 44% of the population were computer aware. It was clear that there was positive correlation between educational attainment, English literacy and computer literacy. In

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<sup>12</sup> Hafkin, N (2005), "Some thoughts on gender and telecommunications/ICT statistics and indicators," World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Meeting, Switzerland.

<sup>13</sup> Jayaweera, S, Sanmugam, T & Wanasundera, L (2006) "Gender and Information and Communication Technology in Sri Lanka. Inclusion or Exclusion?" Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR) Sri Lanka

<sup>14</sup> Supra 6

<sup>15</sup> Supra 6

<sup>16</sup> Computer Literacy Survey – 2009 Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka (ISSN 2012-6565 December 2009)

terms of computer literacy, the study noted that there was a 25% increase at the national level; however, the lowest increase was in the Eastern Province where part of our study **was** conducted. There was a higher literacy among men (22%) as compared with women (19%). One other interesting finding of this survey was that there was high computer literacy among unemployed youth between ages 15-29 waiting to enter into the labour market.

### The infrastructure and institutional frameworks of ICTs

*In a very poor rural village in Vavunatheevu in the interiors of the Batticaloa District, a few children were very excited about being able to locate their village through google maps. Farmers in that village were able to access information about pests, fertilizers and varieties of paddy seed through the internet (Nenasala Interview, Batticaloa.)*

According to the study by Jayaweera et al (2006)<sup>17</sup> the e-Sri Lanka programme which led to the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector and service provision, multiple stakeholder participation and receipt of funding have all yielded positive results. Internet usage, education programmes, business transactions, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in policy-making and electronic factories in free trade zones are all on the increase; however, the use of ICT in poverty alleviation and the health sector was still low.

The institutional and legal frameworks put in place by the Sri Lankan government come under the Sri Lanka Telecommunication Act No. 25 (1991)<sup>18</sup> and Amendment (1996)<sup>19</sup>, Information and Communication Technology Act No. 27 (2003)<sup>20</sup> and Electronic Transactions Act No. 19 of 2006<sup>21</sup>. In terms of information infrastructure the growth in mobile phone usage has exceeded that of fixed line use: 4.2 million compared to 1.5 million in June 2006. In 2006 the number of Internet Service Providers was 27, but 60% of the market was controlled by one ISP<sup>22</sup>.

As support for a comprehensive approach to the promotion of ICT at the national level, a number of key institutional mechanisms have been set up by the respective governments in Sri Lanka. One key structure is the Sri Lanka Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) which issued a draft policy in 2002 recognising the need to create opportunities for citizens to participate in the global economy by creating conditions for e-commerce, information and education and to communicate with the government through ICT. The e-Sri Lanka programme initiated in 2002 was the first comprehensive plan for the development of ICT in Sri Lanka. It identified ICT as the key tool with which to promote economic growth and national integration. The five components of the programme<sup>23</sup> were as follows:

- programme 1: build implementation capacity by increasing the capacity of the government to implement the programme, through partnerships and policy development.
- programme 2: build national information infrastructure and enabling environment.
- programme 3: develop ICT human resources.
- programme 4: e-government delivering citizen services through models of accountability,

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<sup>17</sup> Supra 6

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1991Y0V0C25A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1991Y0V0C25A&hword=)

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1996Y0V0C27A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=1996Y0V0C27A&hword=)

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2003Y0V0C27A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2003Y0V0C27A&hword=)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2006Y0V0C19A&hword="&path=2](http://www.lawnet.lk/process.php?st=2006Y0V0C19A&hword=)

<sup>22</sup> Supra 6

<sup>23</sup> Supra 6

transparency and client-focused services.

programme 5: use ICT as key lever for economic and social development by developing content targeting economic growth, increasing connectivity and the use of mass media for dissemination of information.

The government, entrepreneurs and users have been identified as key stakeholders, with international organisations playing a major role as financiers. A government web portal ([www.gov.lk](http://www.gov.lk)) provides information on government institutions, ministries, departments and other relevant bodies from a single access point, in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Basic information, activities and government forms are accessible through this site. However, at this stage there was no recognition of promoting ICTs as a social transformation structure for rural or poor communities.

In the educational sector, ten universities and the Open University have targeted programmes in the field of ICTs that produce graduates in the engineering, electronics and computer fields. In the last few years they have expanded the enrolment process to meet the demand for information professionals. The government has also set up a national network of over 100 telecentres and affiliated facilities in universities and community locations to reach remote areas, for a distance education modernisation project which has been funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB)<sup>24</sup>. In our research we came across situations where even though rural schools had computers, since they couldn't afford to pay for the internet service provided by private business, the internet connection was cut for many months. This becomes a very important issue and we argue for the need to have access to ICTs as a public good (see policy brief), particularly in the poor and marginalised areas of the country.

New ICTs were introduced to women's groups in the late 90s. Most of the urban based NGOs have since computerised their operations and have internet access. Limitations to access and use do exist in terms of geographical location and available infrastructure, as well as high costs and lack of access to adequate funding which are barriers to the extensive use of ICTs in the organisations. Most of these NGOs use software for word processing and accounting. Very few use computers for data processing, maintaining databases or desktop publishing. Email use is more for international correspondence than local.

### Sarvodaya Nenasala

One of the efforts taken by NGOs to use ICTs for social transformation and community development has been the Tele Centre Family Project of Sarvodaya<sup>25</sup>. In this programme a 1000 telecentres (Nenasala) were initiated around Sri Lanka to encourage community participation – specifically targeting youth, children and farmers. The telecentres were to focus on telemedicine, e-commerce, e-governance etc. Mediums used to create awareness were provincial forums and brainstorm sessions, use of a social networking site (<http://telecentrefamily.ning.com/>) and blogging. However, infrequent participation online due to lack of internet savvy was mentioned in passing as a shortcoming.

According to an Impact Assessment Study of the Tele Centre Family Project done in 2009<sup>26</sup>, the

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<sup>24</sup> Supra 6

<sup>25</sup> Sri Lanka Telecentre Family Network Project (TCF) Final Report, *Evolution of TCF social enterprise*, (May 2006 to December 2009), Prepared by: Telecentre Family Project, Sarvodaya - Fusion

<sup>26</sup> Theory of Change – Impact Assessment, Discussion Paper (2009), Sarvodaya – Fusion, Sri Lanka

programme has not specifically targeted women or consciously included women in their ICT skills development programmes. In terms of the social impact in the village communities, the study noted that it was mostly children and youth who were utilising the telecentres, with 7488 children using the centres as compared to 406 farmers. In terms of usage of the centres – the average number of visitors per week at a telecentre was 25. This assessment did not provide a gender breakdown of users. One objective of our study was to carry out interviews with the Nenasala project to learn about the process in which it engaged women (if it did) and if this engagement had transformed women's experiences of citizenship as defined by this research project.

We interviewed several telecentre operators and users about women's use of ICTs. There were some examples of women using these spaces to communicate, learn and share information. The telecentres had provided new work opportunities and social roles for women (see also following sections). However, women and girls had to negotiate their social realities in accessing these spaces, for example girls were sent to the telecentre only when the woman operator was there.

### Importance of the study

Women's engagement with new media has not been adequately documented in Sri Lanka. This is clearly an 'emerging' area of knowledge both in terms of access to and use of technology by women. From a feminist social sciences perspective, there is equally a need for an exploration of the understanding and practice of citizenship as articulated by women using new media. This study helps to reveal the possibilities for women's practice of citizenship in Sri Lanka, and the potential for new media to be effectively utilised in promoting and enabling women's full participation as citizens. This is an important dimension to document, especially in the context of challenges that women have faced in becoming visible in political discourses through mainstream media.

### Methodology of the study

#### *Engaging with national processes related to ICTs and collecting secondary source material*

For this study we collected as many relevant studies on women and ICT as was possible. We also interviewed other actors in this sector to get a better idea about the context in Sri Lanka. We also participated in national forums that were discussing ICT policy and internet security. Engaging with these forums was very important to learn about national policies and plans as well as to identify and network with key policy actors for the follow-up advocacy work planned from this research. Engaging with these forums also then enabled us to get access to various policy documents related to ICTs.

#### *Action research*

This research project was conducted very much in the line of being 'quick footed' and useful as the process was under way. It envisaged that the information and learning from the research process would feed into the interventions that are being studied so that it shaped and guided the interventions to be more effective. This study used feminist research methodologies of action research – linking the research process to actual practice. This process was followed for the component in relation to women campaigning in the local government elections as well as the process of rural women using the SMS based news service in Batticaloa. As action research

articulates there was to be no distance between the researcher and the subject – it was a close dialogue between the research team and the new media initiatives each feeding into each other.

Rural women using SMS based news - we interviewed selected women at the start of the research project and then again towards the end of the research project to get an idea of how their interactions with ICTs and their social realities had changed (if at all). We also had regular review workshops with the group to discuss challenges and learnings and also provide training on how to use new media tools.

In addition to closely being involved with the above two processes, the research also interviewed other women consuming and engaging with ICTs. We interviewed Tamil and Sinhala language women bloggers, and organised a workshop for these women which was the first of its kind. We also carried out focus group discussions with teenage girls and young women and men in Batticaloa regarding their use of ICTs. These discussions were held at the Eastern University as well as a local rural school in order to understand the context within which women and girls attempted to use ICTs.

We also interviewed people who were running the government Nenasala centres and also women who were using these centres. These were randomly selected Nenasala from three different districts including Batticaloa.

Finally as part of this research, we also used the stat counter on the blog on women's political representation to understand its impact.

## Theoretical framework

### *Citizenship*

The concept of 'citizenship' is an integral part of 'modern' democratic constitutional frameworks. It recognises non-discrimination on the basis of particular characteristics of persons or societal formations, i.e. women, men, sex, gender, language, religion etc, and through these, citizenship is articulated as a form of identity of an individual which 'allows' for recognition of certain rights of that person.

An aspect that is important in an examination of women and citizenship is women's practice of citizenship and how they are 'allowed' to practice citizenship. These can be seen in the ways in which the legal frameworks and interventions position women as citizens and the ways in which these interventions frame the ways in which women are able to practice citizenship. A second aspect would be the ways in which the notion of citizenship provides for the engagement of women and men in the mainstream political arena. Within the political arena the ideologies which give different valuations of power to men and women influence how they are allowed to exercise citizenship. This aspect of making claims within the mainstream political arena is one major component explored in this research study.

The feminist theorising on ICTs have contributed new knowledge on gendered identities, new spaces that have enabled women and men to create their own identities. There has also been some research into how social and cultural norms still dominate women's engagement with ICTs; and

violence against women in these spaces are also very much controlled by these same socio-cultural norms. The control of knowledge spaces and technologies is another dimension that is analysed in the study – of women being 'allowed' to be recognised as knowledge creators, to be active citizens who can control and disseminate information, to be claim makers on power structures and institutions.

### *Margins*

As the title of this paper indicates we were exploring women's lives in the margins of the Sri Lankan State. We conceptualised margins as where women were generally excluded from socio-economic and political processes. Therefore, we use Naila Kabeer's (2005<sup>27</sup>) notion of *inclusive citizenship*<sup>28</sup> - as how citizenship would appear when viewed from the standpoint of those who are excluded. The margins from which this study was conducted were the margins of political processes, margins of knowledge creation, margins of access to ICTs, margins of language and discourse, and the margins of mainstream development processes. From the standpoint of poor rural women, they are also often in the margins of socio-cultural practices which are patriarchal. Therefore, this study documents how women in the margins negotiated their citizenship rights through their engagement with new media technologies. Kabeer's (2005) notion of horizontal citizenship also became very useful for this research, as citizenship is not only about the relationship between individuals and the State but also about the relationships among people. In our study we focused also on the building of horizontal citizenship among women living in the margins of the Sri Lankan polity.

This paper discusses these processes in four sections. The first section analyses the engagement of women through the State Nenasala programmes for improving access to ICT in rural areas. Secondly, this paper documents the experiences of local women's groups using SMS technologies to run a local women's news network. The third section analyses women's experiences in campaigning for local elections in five districts of Galle, Moneragala, Kurunegala, Badulla and Trincomalee. The fourth section analyses the experiences of Sinhala and Tamil language women bloggers in their engagement with new media. The analysis used the notion of hybrid spaces, voice, and claim making on socio-political structures as fundamental components of understanding women's citizenship in Sri Lanka.

## **Reviewing State programmes for promoting ICT usage for social transformation - case studies on selected Nenasala**

In general, the impact study of the Nenasala indicated that its role in development and social change has been low (see above section on Sarvodaya Nenasala). In the Batticaloa district there were 23

<sup>27</sup> Kabeer, N (2005), "Introduction: The Search for Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions in an Interconnected World" in Naila Kabeer (ed) *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, Zed Books UK, USA

<sup>28</sup> Naila Kabeer (2005) puts forward the idea of '*inclusive citizenship*' in which she describes citizenship as having four key elements. Firstly a notion of **justice** – when it is fair for people to be treated the same and when it is fair that they should be treated differently, for example that black people in America needed special affirmative action policies to overcome historic discrimination. Secondly, the notion of citizenship has within it a demand for **recognition** - as both the intrinsic worth of all human beings as well as the recognition of people's differences, for example that people with disabilities have the right to be recognised as full citizens and that our social-economic and educational structures need to change to enable people with disabilities to be active members of our society. Thirdly, she notes that specially in contexts where people have been denied self determination, citizenship entails their right to exercise some degree of **control over their own lives**, for example, women's right to have control over and take decisions regarding their sexuality and reproductive rights. Finally, citizenship means the capacity to **identify with others** in their claims for justice and recognition, for example standing in solidarity with poor people's demand to right to food and livelihood. Kabeer further stresses the importance of the relationship between people – *the horizontal view of citizenship* – as important as the traditional vertical view of citizenship which is between the State and the people.

listed Nenasala, out of which we randomly selected 10 for our research study. We were able to find only six functioning Nenasala. Two of those we interviewed were run by women. Even the functioning Nenasala often faced problems of not having a suitable space, not having internet connections and not having electricity.

In our field visits and interviews what was shared was that the Nenasala had provided new arenas of work for women to some extent. This work also provided new social roles and recognitions within their communities. They were approached for information, and their advice and skills in negotiating ICT technology was valued. Nenasalas were used more by women than men.

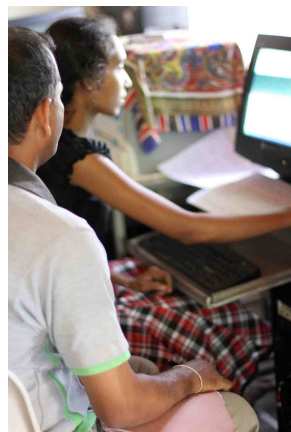
There were some examples of Nenasala being used to create knowledge such as the involvement of young Nenasala users in the translation of Wikipedia into Sinhala. There was also a significant number of young women using ICTs through Sinhala and Tamil language, overcoming the barriers of English. The Nenasalas had also provided new avenues for communication with family members who were abroad as migrant workers through Skype.

In Batticaloa, there were added challenges that Nenasala operators faced in relation to the war. When they received computers they faced many threats by persons with political power who wanted to take the computers. Women faced additional social pressures as they were seen as incapable of running a Nenasala. They received many telephone threats by high officers and politicians demanding the computers. The first Nenasala started in 2007, in a period where there was heightened warfare in the country. In the East there were many abductions and disappearances. Due to this parents were afraid to send their children out and therefore for many years the Nenasalas were not used by young people.

### **Nenasala – Karuvakerni**

Fathima first used the internet through a Nenasala. Now she has an e mail and a Facebook account and through these she has made contact with many people. She uses the internet to plan her work with a local NGO where she facilitates programmes for children and youth. She also uses Skype to talk to her mother and uncle who are abroad as migrant workers. She likes the Nenasala as it is cheap and safe for women like her to access.

### **Nenasala – Godakawela**



The Godakawela Nenasala was founded by W.M.K. Priyangani, a Women's Development Officer in Kahawatta. She started it as an institution where people would be able to use and learn about computers, use the internet and other facilities, follow computer courses and also as an e-commerce initiative where local women would be able to sell their handicraft through a web portal. This project is known as Handicraft Lanka. However, we were told that the project is suspended because the website is being updated and several months later service has not been resumed.

The computer course offered at the Nenasala includes introduction to computers, Microsoft Office and Internet/ Email.

### Equipment

- Laptop (equipped with Windows 7 software)
- Five desktop computers (Windows XP)
- Two printers
- Scanner
- Fax machine
- Photocopy machine

### Services

- Scanning
- Printing
- E-channeling
- Photocopying
- Computer training
- Selling mobile phone cards
- Blank CD selling and writing
- Laminating and binding
- Internet services, E-mail
- Telephone calls and fax (local & international)
- Downloading data and information

### Access to Internet

Able to access:

- Skype
- Internet Explorer
- Mozilla Firefox
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Windows Messenger
- Games
- Bluetooth



## Courses

- Microsoft Office

## Other

- Monthly subscribers of 'Ray (bilingual)' Sri Lanka's first digital digest.
- 'Roo' ICT digest magazines.
- CDs on home gardening as well as computer training.
- Handicraft Lanka is a project supported by Nenasala.
- An introductory session on translating Wikipedia articles to Sinhala was held at the Nenasala and some of the students have started participating in this project.

## **Anoma Ranjani – Telecentre Operator**



Anoma Ranjani has been working as the telecentre operator of the Godakawela Nenasala for almost two years. Before being appointed as the telecentre operator, she was a student at the Nenasala and followed the computer course on MS Office. There were about 20 people in her class and they were all young men and women who were all job hopefuls wanting to acquire computer skills. After completing the course and while waiting for a job, she was asked to work as the telecentre operator. She trained under the previous operators and started working as the telecentre operator about two years ago.

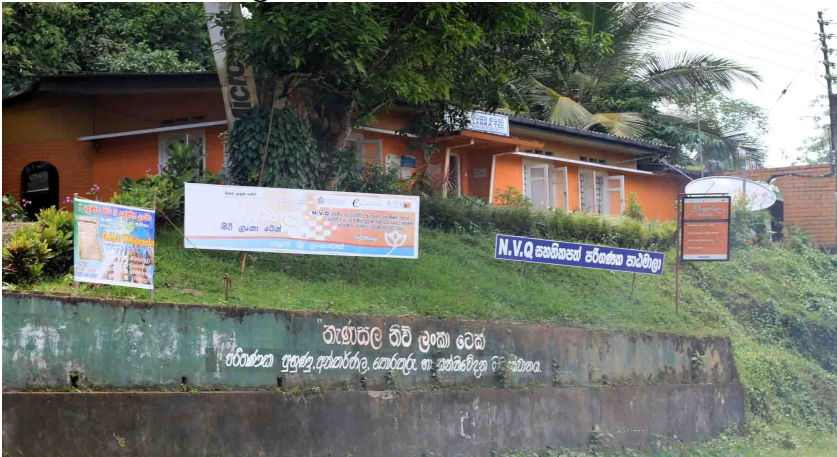
Her work includes assisting people with Internet research (school teachers in particular), helping people develop practical skills when using computers, typesetting, photocopying, scanning, printing, etc.

Anoma observed that the reason why parents are comfortable sending their children to the Nenasala rather than the other computer institutions and net cafés in town is because the telecentre operator is a woman and therefore they feel secure sending the children there, especially the girls. In fact, some

parents call the Nenasala before sending their child and check whether the woman operator is on duty that day.

For Anoma, this job has been useful in honing her own skills and is a stepping-stone to a career, preferably in the government service. She is hoping her experience and knowledge would help her get a good job.

### **Nenasala – Nivithigala**



The Nivithigala Nenasala was founded by Sanjeewa Kumarasinghe, who taught IT in a government school (Sumana Balika Vidyalaya, Ratnapura). It has been functioning for five years now and offers a variety of educational services and also offers the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certificate, which is awarded by the Ministry of Vocational and Technical Training.

### Services

- Computer courses taught in both Sinhala and Tamil. Tamil courses taught by a visiting instructor.
- Students presented for district level computer exams which are conducted both in Sinhala and Tamil.
- Sundays the computer lab is reserved for families of migrant workers to communicate with them via Skype.
- IT Club which holds a variety of programmes related to IT education.
- Legal clinic hosted at the Nenasala.
- An annual digital Vesak pandol created by the Nenasala.

**Scheme of Training**

Institution (පාఠ ශාලාව) : \_\_\_\_\_ Trade (වෘත්ත) : \_\_\_\_\_

Module (මාදුලය) : M-04 Date Prepared (ලියාපදිංචි කළ දිනය) : \_\_\_\_\_ Date Revised (සංස්කරණය කළ දිනය) : \_\_\_\_\_

Month (මාසය)	Week No. (සතිය අංකය)	Session (විෂය)	Module & Tasks expected to cover (මාදුලය සහ කටයුතු)	Resources and cost (මූලාශ්‍රයන් සහ වියදම)	Services & utility (සේවාවන් සහ උපකරණ)	Assessment (මැනවීම)
04-05	15-17	06	Create a slide Apply design template Insert image Set slide transition Set animation Run the show Add presentation note Insert chart Insert action button Create hyper link Print slide Insert Sound Record Sound Insert Video Set rehearsal time Set up show Organize presentation equipment	Computer & Printer		

Access to Internet

- Students are given Internet access but they are not allowed to use Facebook. This is a decision made by Sanjeeewa because he believes that social networking sites are a distraction at the Nenasala which focuses on education. And he does not want to be held responsible if students compromise their privacy through social networking and get into trouble.

Courses

- Microsoft Office
- Graphic design, hardware, etc.
- National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certificate
- Computer course for school children
- English and Tamil language courses, Maths classes

**COURSE PLAN**  
Nenasala New Lanka Tec  
No 57, Ratnapura Road, Nivithigala

Mo No	1 <sup>st</sup> Month				2 <sup>nd</sup> Month				3 <sup>rd</sup> Month				4 <sup>th</sup> Month				5 <sup>th</sup> Month				6 <sup>th</sup> Month			
	1W	2W	3W	4W	1W	2W	3W	4W	1W	2W	3W	4W	1W	2W	3W	4W	1W	2W	3W	4W	1W	2W	3W	4W
In.Co	■																							
MO1		■																						
MO2			■																					
MO7				■																				
MO3							■																	
MO4								■																
MO5												■												
MO6																■								
MO8																				■				

Other

- CDs from the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences of the University of Sabaragamuwa
- CDs from the Sarvodaya support services
- Monthly subscribers of 'Ray (bilingual)' Sri Lanka's first digital digest
- Small library containing books on computer science

### Key Person Interview

#### **Sanjeewa Kumarasinghe – Nenasala Owner and Telecentre Operator**

In recognition of his services, Sanjeewa has been appointed as the ICT Ambassador for the Sabaragamuwa province. He believes that through the Nenasala he can make a huge difference in the lives of young people by assisting them in gaining educational qualifications, guiding them to achieve certification in vocational studies, etc.

Sanjeewa stated that the majority of the users at the Nivithigala Nenasala are women, mostly young women. Most men in the area drop out of school early in order to pursue gem mining and therefore it is the women who pursue higher studies and/or courses. This was evidenced by the daily register of the Nenasala, which except for a rare case, contained all female names.

However, most of the young women who follow the courses at the Nenasala don't pursue it any further than to start their own business, such as communication centres or cyber cafes.

He would like these young women to put their computer education to more use and is planning to start a Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) along with the Nenasala and employ youth who complete the courses offered at the Nenasala. He will be providing the initial training free of charge.

Sanjeewa wants the Nivithigala Nenasala to eventually turn into an IT and education hub in not only the district but also the Sabaragamuwa province.

### **Concluding Reflections**

The key policy implications from this analysis were that even though ICTs were available it did not mean that access was ensured to women and girls. In some of the centres girls were sent to the centres only if women operators were there and the space was seen as safe. In the focus group discussions in Batticaloa, teenage girls mentioned that their first interaction with the internet was when they checked their exam results for their State exams. And even though the boys completed their computer courses, girls often had dropped out. They were stopped by their families because there was 'talk' about them mixing with boys at the centres. In the focus group discussions at the Eastern University, women mentioned that it would be good if there were women only internet cafes.

The students who were part of the focus group in Batticaloa also noted that even though their school had computers they did not have internet access as the school could not afford to pay the private provider. This leads to an important policy recommendation – that access to ICTs must be ensured as a public utility. This is particularly important for rural marginalised communities. The access to ICTs cannot be seen only through a business model, but as a key component of development planning. Public information infrastructure can be responsive to marginalised women and the poor

where as private ICT approaches will not.

Studies done in South Asia have shown that private sector led approaches have not increased poor people's access to services (Swamy, 2008<sup>29</sup>). The policy framework should recognise that information gate keeping takes place where local patriarchies in the homes and communities mediate women's access to public information. This control is determined by caste, religion, ethnicity, income, education, age etc. To overcome these it is important not only to provide the technology but also to mobilise women to be aware of their right to information as well as skills to be able to access information regarding health, livelihoods, markets, news, culture etc. Therefore ministries such as the Ministry for Women Empowerment have a vital role to play in mobilizing women to access, control and create content in relation to ICTs.

Another important policy implication is that women and girls (and indeed men) should be made aware of issues around internet security and privacy and the real risks for women and girls with regard to violence through ICTs. This is further discussed with regard to women bloggers.

## **Creating women's news from the margins – engaging in the public sphere as active citizens**

### ***Minmini Seithihal***

#### **Methodology and process**

Minmini Seithihal began in mid-2010 as a small experimental effort - with locally generated funds. It was in a testing phase for some months where technology and the human systems required were tested using frontline SMS to send out news or information collated. The test phase had 15 women engaged with community issues and had a six member editorial team. The editorial systems and checks were carefully thought through and trialed before the network was opened as a public source of news. It was using Roman script to communicate Tamil language content, since Unicode is not universally used yet. This was a huge challenge and many receivers complained that it was hard to read and understand the news. The process of engaging with new technologies and upgrading systems will be a continuous process.

This study used feminist research methodologies of action research – linking the research process to actual practice. This study documented the inception and process of women using new media through the evolution of Minmini Seithihal. The research process had a regular dialogue with women consuming and engaging with the process through interviews, short training workshops and focus group discussions.

As action research articulates there was no distance between the researcher and the subject – the research team and the new media initiatives each fed into each other. We had a three month trial period with a closed group of women so that we could learn by doing. After the three months we had the first review discussion with the local women involved in Minmini Seithihal. Following the review the initiative was opened up to general audiences and the number of subscribers was gradually increased. After six months of running Minmini Seithihal we had individual interviews

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<sup>29</sup> Swamy, M (2008), “ICTs and Women's Empowerment: Findings from South Asia” in An Empowerment Approach to Gender Equality in the Information Society, Regional Analysis from Asia, IT for Change

with 22 women and men who have been regularly sending and receiving news. These interviews explored their experiences of engaging with new media and the SMS based news service and how in some instances it has been useful for personal transformation and articulating citizenship.

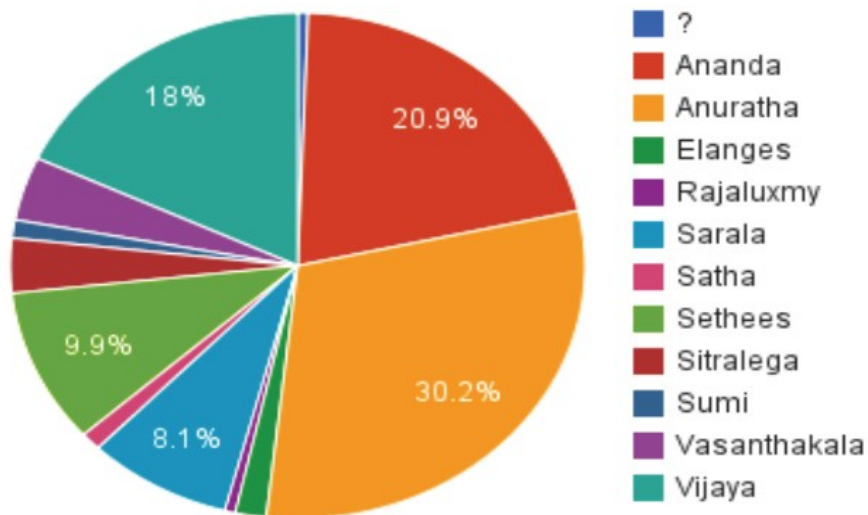


*Minmini Seithihal review workshop with key reporters December 2011*

We also had a three-day training workshop for the local women on how to plan and produce news, how to assess news worthiness, ethical considerations and how to practically use audio visual media tools to generate news stories. The participants were provided with useful material to engage with news creation and understanding how news creation takes place. All the women found this workshop extremely useful.

**Public phase** • 172 stories received from 12 persons

**04/07/2011 to 02/12/2011 Reporter Data**



### Creating knowledge and active engagement with socio-political structures

Minmini Seithihal had been running as a local SMS news service for one year from January 2011. The year included rich experiences in terms of women creating knowledge, internal transformations of women in relation to their use and control of new media technology and making an impact in women's experiences of citizenship.

One of the very important functions of Minmini Seithihal right from the very outset was that it gave central focus to women's lives which were usually in the margins of socio-political discourse. As one of the women in the test group articulated,

*“I see these women everyday as I go to work but I never considered what they do as unusual or important”.*

She was referring to women going out in boats to carry out lagoon fishing and collecting mussels to earn a daily income for their families. Minmini Seithihal focused on the important role women played in sustaining households, even though they were doing work in the informal economy.

As another woman noted, Minmini Seithihal helped to change the ideology around who can make news, who can be in the news and who can access and share news. It enabled women to take control of receiving information and sharing information within their own homes, work places and in other social settings.

“I like the story which I sent, that is, a woman who lost her 3 children and is looking after the grandchildren by doing fishing. She has many other problems as well but I didn't mention that. We have to send limited news to Minmini since it has difficulty in editing the message” (Interview with Minmini reader).

“Also when we receive news, we share that with others. Recently a woman helped a calf to get out of drainage and five women received awards. **Even though these matters are happening we are not considering them as important.** But when we are getting this news through SMS we could share with others. When I share with others they ask if they can get this type of news as well. I told them this is a network and we get all types of news” (Interview with Minmini reader).

If we take (mainstream) media they will put cookery, dramas, etc. When we think about Minmini we think what will be the most needed news. We don't have to put about cooking. We should put what we get from our society about women lives. That will be good (Interview with Minmini reader).

All the women who were interviewed rated SMS as one of the main forms of communication that they used, and it was one of the main forms through which they accessed information and news. Another interesting finding was that women often verbally discussed and shared the news they got through the SMS with at least two to three other persons. Therefore, similar to newspaper readership, it was not only the phone holder who accessed the news, but also two or three others (sometimes more) who were in the same space. Women noted that, as SMS was a combination of

mobility (so one can get the news anywhere) and concreteness (text that one can save and have for a long time), it was much more useful than phone conversations or other forms of communication. It was also very simple to use – one just had to send a text or call one of the editors and give the information.

### *Floods*

The experience of Minmini Seithihal captured in this report starts and ends in the context of serious flooding in Batticaloa. In January 2011 the East coast of Sri Lanka experienced flooding and rains that had not been seen for the past 50 years. As Batticaloa is surrounded by lagoons most areas went under water – destroying paddy lands, sweeping away livestock, damaging houses and household items, damaging access routes for weeks - so people could not access even basic services such as health.

In this context Minmini Seithihal began highlighting women's experiences of the floods. Some examples of the news were -



The sustained monitoring work done through local women's groups helped to highlight the gendered dimensions of flood responses at a district level. During this time Minmini Seithihal acted as a voice for women as well as a mode through which information could be shared. The dimension that Minmini Seithihal brought out into public focus was the impact of the floods on women's livelihoods and coping, as this was an area which was overlooked in the macro assessments of damage and reconstruction done by the government as well as other humanitarian organisations.



The macro assessments focused mainly on agriculture and livestock, not the related small livelihoods that women were involved in and which were so crucial for families living in poverty.

1.3.2011

At UNICEF, the local women's network (WCDM) made a presentation today at the disaster and protection working group on women's concerns in the post-flood situation. The presentation was based on rapid assessment in eight DS divisions.

Another dimension that Minmini Seithihal was able to highlight was the work that was done by local women and women's groups to respond to the flood crisis. These small scale actions never reached mainstream media, where as the massive relief work of the President's office or large humanitarian organisations was always reported. Often mainstream media companies also got involved in the flood response for their own publicity.

“There was a lot of publicity that Shakthi (media channel) was providing flood relief and people were standing by the sides of the road for many hours waiting for them. Finally nothing was distributed to the people. Shakthi gave everything to the Divisional Secretariat” (Interview with Minmini reader).

At the end of 2011, when the rains started again, Minmini Seithihal started providing information and analysis into the district planning processes based on the concrete experiences from early on in the year.

Some examples of the news sent out were -

6.11.2011

I'm very scared about my clay house because rain drenched the walls, said Sukuna from Vavunatheevu.

6.11.2011

What are the preparations you are making for risk of rains and flood disaster? Please share will Minmini.

8.11.2011

DS level contact details of District Disaster Management Unit (DDMU) Batticaloa: Mr. X – Mattakalapu Mavattam, Mr. Y – Kattankudi, Arayampathy, Kaluwanchikudi.

### **Women and migrant work**

The local women who started using Minmini Seithihal more frequently, started reporting on the problems faced by women who were going abroad as migrant workers. They used the space provided by Minmini Seithihal to share their experiences and strategies. From the information provided through Minmini it was possible to help other women to take action in responding to similar challenges faced by women migrant workers.

Some examples of the news sent out -

21/2/2011

Abuse and murder of Sri Lankan housemaids continue - some cases reported in February (woman from Saudi Arabia was admitted to Karapitiya hospital with nails, rescued woman from Saudi farm, sudden death of woman in Jordan, woman returned from Saudi with hand fracture).

11.8.2011

Woman went to Saudi from Batticaloa. Badly treated. 1.5 years cut off from contact with family. Via Batticaloa Foreign Employment Bureau, a women's organisation (TCDO) helped find her and brought her home last month.

11.8.2011

To contact Foreign Employment Bureau: Visit 344/5, Chandra Lane, Batticaloa. Tel: 065 2227547.

25.8.2011

After the Minmini SMS about the Foreign Employment Bureau, four new requests received by women's organisations to locate women and bring them home.

## **Violence against women**

Minmini Seithihal provided an important space in which to raise the issue of violence against women in the district. The local women who worked at the village level had daily experiences of trying to respond to violence in the home and in the community. This violence was also taking place within the context of an area recovering from decades of brutal war. Minmini Seithihal recorded all reports but made an editorial choice not to report on all the cases to avoid sensationalising the issue. Instead Minmini Seithihal provided regular analysis of patterns of violence. Some of the information that was recorded but **not** sent included stories such as -

8.2.2011

Last week, a woman left her 2 day old baby at the Batticaloa hospital. While concerned about the child's future, can we think about how the woman came to this position? How could we have helped her?

15.2.2011

A young girl aged 15 who was abused by her uncle and was pregnant came to the women's shelter for help today.

The news that **was** sent out included some of the following -

7.4.2011

In Batticaloa district 33 sexual abuse cases were recorded with the DCPU in the last three months.

25.7.2011

Statistics from the GBV desk Batticaloa Hospital: 80 cases received in 2009. 142 cases received in 2010. Services for women affected by violence are essential and must be continuously supported.

Case statistics from the GBV desk Batticaloa Hospital 2010: Domestic violence (67), Sexual violence (15), Sexual harassment (15), Child abuse (12), Attempted suicide (25), Murder (01), Husband and wife wish to separate (07).

These sorts of summary reports were very useful for women to use as advocacy within their own work contexts. One very clear example of how Minmini Seithihal information became very useful for a strong articulation of women's rights was when there was a special request made by the UN to the Minmini Seithihal team in Batticaloa to provide a one-page analysis report on the situation of violence against women in the East, for the UN Head of Mission in Sri Lanka.

### **Talking about the war and its aftermath in the current context of heavy militarisation**

As Minmini Seithihal was about marginalised women's lives and experiences, we had to carefully think through how we engaged with the aftermath of the war in the East. In some instances we were able to directly report news such as -

11.7.2011

Govt. issuing death certificates for people missing due to war and disaster. Woman (27) whose husband was 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.

22.7.2011

Security forces removed camp in Semmannodai, Batticaloa (Koralai Pattu Central DS area) and since yesterday (21<sup>st</sup> July) families are returning to their land after 26 years displacement.

We also decided to utilise a story form to discuss more in depth issues related to the war. We therefore did daily episodes of 'through the lives of women' where through eight to nine episodes we shared real stories of women's lives as a means of discussing the complexities around the war and women's experiences of violence.

Minmini Seithihal also played the role of remembering death, violence and loss as an important focus of its work. For example -

5.9.2011

Today families and friends marked the loss of more than 150 persons who were disappeared on 5 Sept 1990 from the 'refugee camp' at Eastern University.

The women involved in the news network identified this role of Minmini Seithihal – that of keeping memories alive – as an important part of its work.

In concluding this section in terms of content of the news, there were small as well as significant impacts coming out of the news shared through the network. Sometimes, it was enabling women to negotiate with the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau to get back their daughters safely from the Middle East. Sometimes it was to influence other agencies in their flood response planning in terms of including a gender perspective and addressing gender needs. Sometimes the information shared through Minmini Seithihal was used for national level advocacy work to highlight the concerns of violence against women in the post conflict context in Batticaloa. Apart from these

impacts there were also other general news that women found very useful, such as the price increases of vegetables and gas. Knowing about special contributions made by local women to Tamil literature, awards won by local women, upcoming training programmes, trade fairs etc.

The close interactions among the women involved in Minmini Seithihal, and the regular reviews, budget meetings and informal feedback has enabled the news network to be more directed and clear in its focus. It has been possible to identify thematic areas to focus on and to provide analysis to the local context.

### Transformations in conceptual understanding of news

In the process discussions with women who were part of the Minmini Seithihal what became apparent was that there were different conceptualizations of what was 'news'. Also, what was the role and capacity of oneself as a citizen to create news about social situations - was a learning that many women in the test group reflected on. Generally as women working in community based organisations, what they considered as important news was either 'breaking news' as they had experienced through mainstream media, or cases of violence against women that were 'incidents' to be reported. In both cases the editorial team had to play an important mediating role to discuss and clarify with the test group members (including the editorial team) what Minmini Seithihal considered as news.

In relation to the former, we discussed how the Minmini Seithihal did not have the capacity or the resources to compete with the big media machines in generating 'breaking news' even if it was related to Batticaloa. We were not in competition with that market. There were a few incidents which we had to carefully think about before reporting.

One was the news that certain fresh water tanks had burst their gates due to the heavy flooding. We realised that we could not physically go and verify these claims, secondly these claims usually had to be given by the irrigation department officials who gave valid reports on the status of the gates and finally what would have been the purpose of such a news unless to create panic. And in this context the Police were active in managing crowd panic and informing people if they needed to move. Therefore we decided this was not the role of Minmini Seithihal.

Another was in relation to student unrest at the university, where Minmini Seithihal members happened to be on the ground witnessing what took place. Here too we decided it was not the role of Minmini Seithihal to report on these stories as we had a responsibility to protect our test group members as well as avoid spreading rumours and panic.

In the interviews that took place after six months, women noted that Minmini Seithihal was easy to access and use as it was run by local women and belonged to them, as opposed to trying to use mainstream media.

“We tell Minmini immediately whatever news we get day to day. Minmini is easy for me. Because I type and send the message the moment I get it. If we want to send a news to (mainstream) media we have to get the contact details of the relevant person and if they take it as an important news only they will publish it, but if our news is accurate and verified then Minmini would publish it immediately (Interview with

Minmini reader).

Some of the women who were part of the Minmini Seithihal were already integrated to local informal networks and these links then enabled them to engage with the SMS news and use it to strengthen some of their own networks particularly in relation to their work.

I don't take any news from the internet. I go to do field work. I give the news to Minmini as soon as I get it from the field. My friends also share information with me through the telephone. Last week I received information that due to lightening (and flooding) 13 cows were dead. I went to that place as part of my work and found out 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 and for the follow up reports, I talked with the police and GS through the telephone and found the accurate details regarding these incidents (interview with Minmini reader).

Mainstream media often did not report on local stories that were given by local women's groups and women had no control on how news was represented and reported. It was difficult to avoid politicisation of reporting in the mainstream media. A key example of this was the media reporting of attacks on women which took place in July-August 2011. The sensationalisation of the 'marmamanithan' (mystery man) attacks in the mainstream media led to huge panic and violence in the communities in Batticaloa. Minmini Seithihal provided a more analytical focus for the incidents.

“Today media freedom is limited. Therefore, we cannot write about the violence against women specially political related violence openly.” (Interview with Minmini reader)

### Creating a new social collective

Women appreciated the fact that Minmini Seithihal ran on personal relationships of trust. This enabled news to be shared with confidence as well as for confidentiality to be maintained. Women valued the support provided by the editorial team to clarify and verify the news as well as to make clear judgement calls on safety and security of those who provide the news and of whom the news story was about. This trust was something which women did not have with any mainstream media outlets. This trust was something to be greatly valued in the context of communities recovering from years of war and mistrust. The deafening silences around human rights abuses and the inability to share any information even with close colleagues were extremely disempowering for women in the war years. Therefore, women valued the trust networks that were strengthened through Minmini Seithihal and the space provided to share, with confidence, sensitive issues.

Minmini Seithihal also provided a space for local advertising of programmes and activities carried out at the local level by women's groups. This included training programmes for women writers, publishing of local journals, activities organised for advocacy around the International Women's Day, local trade fairs etc.

The women who were closely involved with Minmini Seithihal felt that the role of the news network was not only to report on news. But that there had to be follow up action that took place based on the news reports. Sometime the follow up would be based on an analysis of trends – such as violence against women. Sometimes the follow up would be in relation to one particular news

item. For example, the editorial team interviewed government officials several times to find out more about a specific livelihoods programme for women that was being implemented with Indian Government funds.

Some women noted that their consumption of mainstream news had changed after engaging with Minmini Seithihal. Now they searched for news in relation to women's rights and women's lives, and shared this with other local women using Minmini Seithihal.

One woman reflected on her engagement with new media and noted that it had enabled her to access information quickly and easily. The SMS provided an engagement with public space and public information which was not easily available to women due to control of their mobility and patriarchal structures of knowledge.

“It is difficult for me or others to go out and get news in our environment. Everyone will be busy. Now 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 that has happened around me”. (Interview with Minmini reader)

Minmini Seithihal highlighted instances where women were writing and creating knowledge and discourse. As one Minmini reader noted, men always found it easier to get their work published. Publicising women's creativity and contributions helped to change the patriarchal control over knowledge creation.

“Women would not tell their talents openly (in public space). Because of this women are treated as 2<sup>nd</sup> class in many occasions. Therefore, it is good to bring them forward through this type of network”. (Interview with Minmini reader)

### Contributing to the design of the structures of ICTs

Minmini Seithihal was interviewed in 2011 by FrontlineSMS as a part of its consultations with users for the design of the user interface and functionality for its new version. In early 2012, Minmini Seithihal was invited to contribute a guest blog on its news service, and was also included in the closed Beta-testing group for the new version of FrontlineSMS. Minmini Seithihal therefore is engaging in the development of the architecture and structures of new media technology itself.

### Concluding reflections

Based on our experience of running Minmini Seithihal it can be said that women's engagement with new media technologies were contingent on several socio-cultural factors. Similar to Fareeda Shahid<sup>30</sup>'s analysis of the 'Arab Spring', technology only played an enabling role to an existing dynamic mobilisation of people and consciousness. Minmini too became possible because of the existing political consciousness of the women involved, and the existing networks of trust. For the women involved in the SMS news network, the creation, control and access to news was very empowering. The technology enabled women to move through barriers to mobility, power hierarchies and access to information. It was also creating a new social collective – or a new techno-social reality that was engaging with traditional boundaries of space – media space,

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<sup>30</sup> Shaheed, F (2011), Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society: A Concept Note, CITIGEN Network, IT for Change

knowledge space and geographic space. In terms of the actual news, in some instances women were able to use the knowledge for transformative action. Sometimes this took the form of individual women exercising their rights and at other times where analysis provided by Minmini was used for higher level advocacy at the district level. However, there is a long way to go, and many more practical and socio-cultural challenges to address in the coming year.

## **Women's political participation and ICT**

This aspect of the study looked at the way in which women engaged the representation of women in national decision making processes in the political arena. The Women and Media Collective launched a media campaign aimed at raising awareness on the importance of increasing women's participation and representation in mainstream politics, focusing initially on local government. This study followed the evolution of this campaign and the mode of implementation of the campaign.

The new media campaign<sup>31</sup> profiled women candidates through a website which they had written as well as video and audio clips. There were news feeds into the site from the district level campaigning and activism.

As part of a campaign to increase women's political participation, WMC launched "Changing Minds", a blog (<http://srilankawomeninpolitics.blogspot.com>) to feature female candidates from five districts (Galle, Monaragala, Badulla, Kurunegala and Trincomalee) who wished to contest for the Local Government Elections that were held in March 2011. Use of ICT in such a manner for a campaign was a first for WMC and in political campaigning in general.

The blog was setup in both Sinhala and English languages and each candidate was featured on the blog with their photograph and political profile. The blog contained profiles of nearly 180 women candidates. There were also video and audio interviews from most of the candidates which were uploaded to YouTube and Soundcloud respectively, and featured on the blog.

The blog was also used to highlight relevant news items from mainstream media. Newspaper articles, TV and radio clips, documentaries, photos, etc. were regularly posted on the blog in both Sinhala and English.

The media campaign launched by WMC for the local government elections was complemented by the blog which republished the newspaper, radio and TV advertisements, billboards, posters, etc. which were used in the campaign.

The blog also included links to women's organisations and other organisations involved in the project.

### **Target Audience**

The main target groups of the blog were:

- Political parties
- Women's organisations
- The general public that is eligible to vote

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<sup>31</sup> <http://srilankawomeninpolitics.blogspot.com/>

These target groups did not change during the campaign but there was more emphasis on using the blog as a resource for political parties to identify potential women candidates.

### Promoting the blog

The blog was promoted via email, the WMC website, the WMC Facebook page, etc. It was also listed on the most popular blog aggregator in Sri Lanka, [www.kottu.org](http://www.kottu.org). Whenever WMC or the other partner organisations held meetings with members of political parties to build awareness on increasing women's political participation, the blog address was shared with them with a brief on the information it contained. It was also shared with other women's organisations and the candidates featured on the blog, and they were encouraged to share it with others. The blog address was included at the bottom of any handouts and flyers that were distributed by WMC as part of the campaign. However, it was noted that despite the Sinhala speaking demography being one of the main targets of the blog, it could not be listed on any of the Sinhala blog aggregators due to the blog containing content in English as well.

### Feedback

Interestingly, while the stat counter on the blog showed that the blog was visited daily, there were no comments left on the blog itself. However, some feedback was received via email acknowledging the work done by WMC in creating the blog and profiling the potential women candidates. There was also positive feedback from women's organisations, candidates and political parties.

### Statistics

Latest statistics from the blog have been cited as follows.

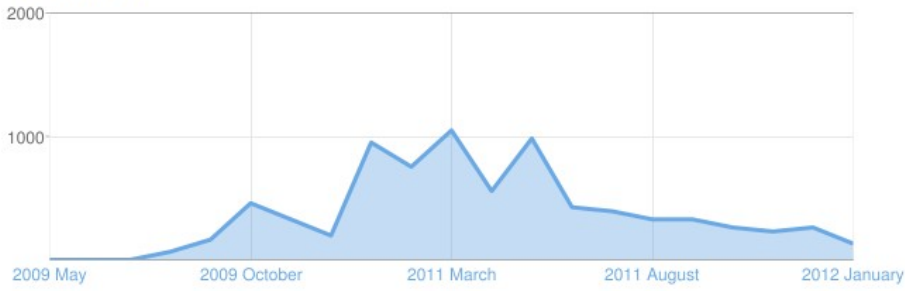


## Overview

[Refresh](#)

[Now](#) [Day](#) [Week](#) [Month](#) [All time](#)

2009 May - 2012 January



Pageviews today	4
Pageviews yesterday	4
Pageviews last month	150
Pageviews all time history	7,912

[Don't track your own pageviews](#)

## Posts

[More](#)

<a href="#">Muhamad Bowsy Mumthaj Bergam</a>	135 Pageviews
Jan 24, 2011	
<a href="#">The importance of women in politics?</a>	117 Pageviews
Jan 17, 2011	
<a href="#">Press Breifing to annouce the nominated female can...</a>	61 Pageviews
Feb 11, 2011	
<a href="#">ආකල්පයන් වනෙන් කිරීම: කන්කාටන් හට නාමයෝජනා හා ඡන්...</a>	46 Pageviews
Aug 6, 2010	
<a href="#">LG elections campaign banners from Kinniya, Trinco...</a>	36 Pageviews
Mar 16, 2011	

## Traffic Sources

[More](#)

<a href="http://kottu.org/">http://kottu.org/</a>	370
<a href="http://www.womenandmedia.net/">http://www.womenandmedia.net/</a>	70
<a href="http://yandex.ru/yandsearch?text=srilankawomeninpolitics">http://yandex.ru/yandsearch?text=srilankawomeninpolitics</a>	30

## Audience

[More](#)



## Posts

Refresh

Now Day Week Month All time

2009 May - 2012 January

<a href="#">Muhamad Bowsy Mumthaj Bergam</a>	135 Pageviews	
Jan 24, 2011		
<a href="#">The importance of women in politics?</a>	117 Pageviews	
Jan 17, 2011		
<a href="#">Press Breifing to announce the nominated female can...</a>	61 Pageviews	
Feb 11, 2011		
<a href="#">ආකල්පයන් වනෙන් කිරීම: කාන්තාවන් හට නාමයෝජනා හා ඡන්...</a>	46 Pageviews	
Aug 6, 2010		
<a href="#">LG elections campaign banners from Kinniya, Trinco...</a>	36 Pageviews	
Mar 16, 2011		
<a href="#">Rinoza Banu Rafeek</a>	29 Pageviews	
Nov 19, 2010		
<a href="#">Ensure 1/3 nominations for women at the Local Gove...</a>	27 Pageviews	
Jan 21, 2011		
<a href="#">News</a>	27 Pageviews	
Mar 18, 2011		
<a href="#">News - Press Briefing on the Local Government Elec...</a>	26 Pageviews	
Sep 28, 2010		
<a href="#">අමතන කුමාරි මුද්දරත්ගම</a>	26 Pageviews	
Jan 18, 2011		

## Pages

<a href="#">List of nominated women</a>	97 Pageviews	
Feb 18, 2011		
<a href="#">About this Blog</a>	94 Pageviews	
Dec 8, 2010		
<a href="#">List summary of potential candidates</a>	88 Pageviews	
Jan 17, 2011		

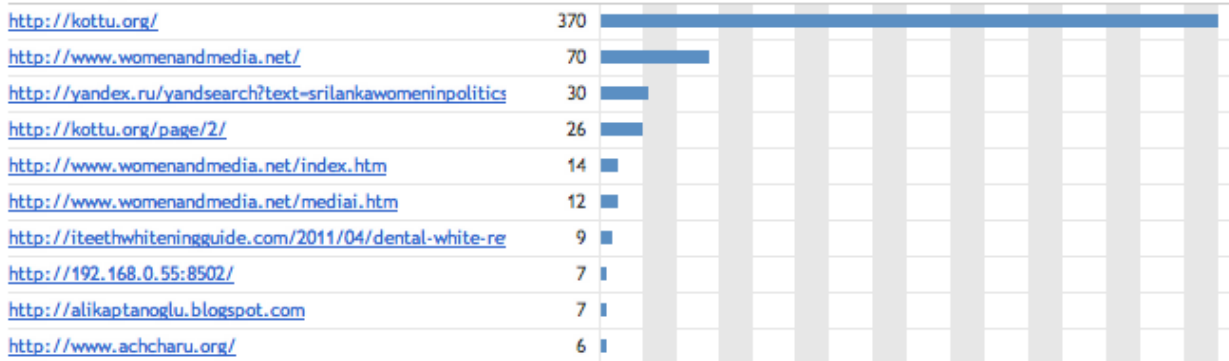
## Traffic Sources

Refresh

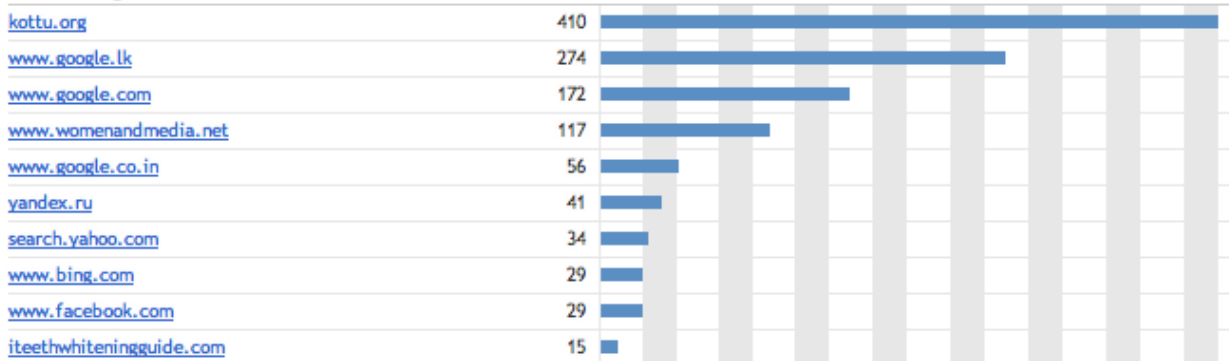
Now Day Week Month All time

2009 May - 2012 January

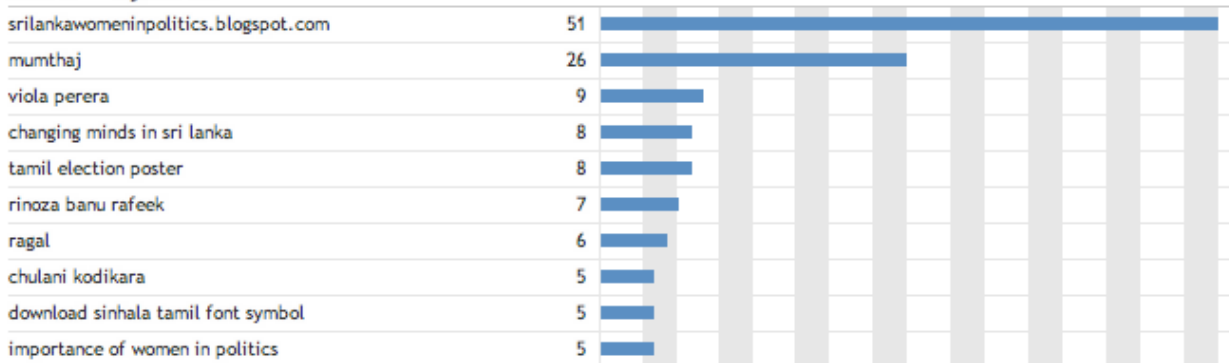
### Referring URLs



### Referring Sites



### Search Keywords



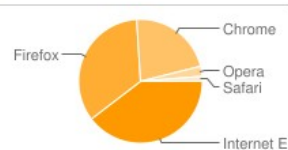
**Pageviews by Countries**



Sri Lanka	5,177
United States	657
Russia	213
India	140
Italy	106
Ukraine	103
Brazil	64
United Arab Emirates	60
United Kingdom	59
Canada	58

**Pageviews by Browsers**

Internet Explorer	3,094 (39%)
Firefox	2,696 (34%)
Chrome	1,740 (22%)
Opera	212 (2%)
Safari	92 (1%)
(FlipboardProxy	13 (<1%)
NS8	12 (<1%)
NetFront	10 (<1%)
Netscape	8 (<1%)
(FlipboardBrowserProxy	4 (<1%)



**Pageviews by Operating Systems**

Windows	7,383 (96%)
Macintosh	129 (1%)
Linux	52 (<1%)
Other Unix	30 (<1%)
Nokia	27 (<1%)
SonyEricsson	10 (<1%)
iPhone	7 (<1%)
Ubuntu	3 (<1%)
Android	2 (<1%)
BlackBerry	1 (<1%)



The total number of visits in the 32 months the blog has been in existence is 7912 and as evident from the statistics, the peak months were January to May, 2011; before, during and immediately after the election.

- January - 963
- February - 758
- March - 1056 (month of the election)
- April - 573
- May - 971

5177 page views were from Sri Lanka.

When analysing the most popular posts on the blog, it seems that one candidate in particular had shared her profile extensively as it is the most visited post on the blog. However, even her popularity and use of new media technologies did not totally overcome the patriarchal barriers that inhibited women in politics, as she was not even nominated to run for the election by her political party. It is clear that new media provides useful opportunities and potentials for women engaging in political processes. This first attempt became a learning experience, providing women a voice and means in which to engage with the public. The learning from these new initiatives can be shared with actors involved in broader processes for increasing women's representation in political processes such as the Women Empowerment Ministry.

## Concluding reflections

Years of campaigning for the increase of women in decision making has had little impact in challenging patriarchal political processes (CEDAW Shadow Report 2010<sup>32</sup>). The WMC campaign did influence discourses in the 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. In the 2011 elections there was no impact on increasing the nominations of women and the number of women who won enough votes to enter local government. The required structural change will take place only with a sustained and strong advocacy campaign by many actors at many levels. New media provides essential tools, spaces and voice for collective action. The learning from the WMC pioneering initiative is being documented and will be shared with other relevant actors. This would enable the development of a collective strategy on ensuring that women can make 'real claims' on democratic processes.

## Gender audit of Sinhala language blogs

The audit was done by analysing the latest 100 posts in two different Sinhala language blog aggregators.

Sinhala Blog Reader ( <a href="http://blogs.sinhalabloggers.com/">http://blogs.sinhalabloggers.com/</a> )	
Men	62%
<b>Women</b>	<b>20%</b>
Other	18%

Lankeeya Sithuvili ( <a href="http://syndi.lankeeya.lk/">http://syndi.lankeeya.lk/</a> )	
Men	66%
<b>Women</b>	<b>19%</b>
Other	15%

A sample of the blogs that were identified as being written by women were then analysed individually in several criteria.

## Online Privacy and Security

<sup>32</sup> [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngo/WMD\\_SriLanka48.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngo/WMD_SriLanka48.pdf)

- Name
  - o Real name - 45%
  - o Nickname - 55%
  
- Photo
  - o 25% had a photo of themselves posted in the blog

**Blogging since**

- 2008 - 10%
- 2009 - 25%
- 2010 - 40%
- 2011 - 25%

This showed a tendency to discontinue blogging after a time period since the oldest blogs in the sample were less than four years old.

**Blog content**

- Diary entries - 60%
- Creative writing - 60%
- Educational - 10%
- News - 10%
- Reviews - 10%
- ICT - 5%

**Blog popularity**

- Hits
  - o 100 – 1000 - 15%
  - o 1000 - 5000 - 15%
  - o 5000 - 10000 - 15%
  - o 10000 - 20000 - 10%
  - o Over 20000 - 20%
  
- Followers
  - o Less than 100 - 30%
  - o 100 – 500 - 30%

**Online Marketing**

- Blog syndicator button - 45%
- RSS feed - 30%

- Flickr link or badge - 25%
- Facebook page - 20%
- Email subscription - 10%
- Twitter feed - 10%
- Live traffic feed - 10%
- YouTube link - 5%
- Advertisements - 5%
- None - 10%

### **Other**

- Only 10% had put up a copyright notice to protect their intellectual property.

### **Conclusion**

- The audit results showed that Sinhala language women bloggers largely focused on blogging personal diary entries and posting creative writing.
- They also showed fewer competencies in promoting their blogs through online marketing when compared to their male counterparts.
- It was also noted that 25% of them posted personal photographs in their blogs which are accessible to anyone.
- Based on these conclusions, a meeting with Sinhala and Tamil language women bloggers was convened in order to better understand the results of the gender audit.

### **Women bloggers creating knowledge and challenging power structures of mainstream media**

Following up on the gender audit of the local language blogs, WMC organised a meeting with Sinhala and Tamil language women bloggers, the first of its kind in Sri Lanka. The meeting was held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2011. It was attended by over 20 bloggers including several bloggers from Jaffna in the North of Sri Lanka.

The meeting started off with an introduction by WMC Director, Dr. Sepali Kottegoda, who presented a brief history of WMC and about WMC entering the domain of new media. She also explained to them the new media research currently being conducted by WMC and invited the bloggers to engage in a discourse on citizenship.

The discussion was guided by several questions posed by the research team.<sup>33</sup>

When asked about why they started blogging, the bloggers cited various reasons. Several journalists stated that they used blogs as a publishing platform for some of their work that is not published by mainstream media due to lack of space, security concerns, etc. or is published but not satisfactorily so, due to heavy editing. They also believe that blogging enables them to promote ethical journalism and that they encourage more women to join them because women bloggers are still a minority in Sri Lanka, especially among journalists.

<sup>33</sup>see Annexure 1

Another blogger who produces community radio shows started blogging because she wanted to give a visual aspect to the programmes she produced for community radio. Therefore, she took photos during assignments and then created videos with the photos and the audio clips and shared them on YouTube and then in her blog. This had the added advantage of accessibility because community radio is only available in the Eastern Province whereas her blog could be accessed by anyone anywhere in the world.

There were many who started blogging simply to express themselves, share experiences and network with others. Their blogs contain personal diary entries, their opinions on current events, etc.



There were others who used their blogs as a creative outlet and posted creative writing, photos, paintings, music, etc. They also expected comments and feedback for the work they posted on their blogs.

The main expectation they had of blogging was creating a space in which they could express themselves and this led to a discourse on the freedom of expression on one's blog and the limitations thus, whether self imposed or imposed by society.

The group agreed that online security and online privacy were important factors in censoring oneself while blogging. However, their opinions were varied on this issue.

There were some who blogged under their real names, most of them being journalists. They did this in order to add their blogs to their professional portfolio and were prepared to deal with any offensive comments or feedback that would be directed at them by their readers.

However, they were the exception because most of the bloggers present at the meeting blogged under pseudonyms and nicknames. They didn't want to be recognised because according to them, when it comes to defamation, slander, gossip, etc. the online world was as bad as the offline world. In fact, sometimes worse. Therefore, they chose to be anonymous.

However, some of the anonymous bloggers didn't have an issue with revealing their identity to others they have met through blogging and developed offline relationships with some.



There is an even smaller minority who use a blogging nickname because they build and sell a certain image through their blogs, which can be enhanced by a catchy nickname. They have no qualms revealing their real names and use nicknames simply to market their blogs better.

While their opinions were varied, the bloggers were all aware that currently there are huge issues surrounding online security and online privacy and cited several cases where revealing personal details on a blog has put bloggers in danger with the result of one blogger being arrested and another having his blog hacked into.

Therefore, most of them tended to be cautious when blogging, whether using their real names or nicknames.

The women at the meeting said that they were proud to be identified as bloggers and of their capacity to express themselves and share ideas on a public space that is accessible not just to local readers but to international readers as well.

All of them read and commented on other blogs and networked with other bloggers. However, they faced a language barrier when it came to certain blogs and they would like a space where they can find translations of the more interesting posts in such blogs. They inquired as to whether WMC had the resources to create such a space where they could share ideas and receive feedback.

An interesting point that came up during the meeting was that although blogs had given women access in the online sphere, it is not the same offline. While the Sinhala language bloggers were included in blogger meet ups initiated by collectives such as the Sinhala Bloggers Union, the Tamil language bloggers observed that the WMC meeting was the first time they got a chance to gather as a group and share ideas because Tamil language women bloggers were excluded from similar meetings organised by Tamil language bloggers. This was an important point in the discourse on access.

When it came to technical capacity, while many of them were familiar with tools such as RSS feeds, Facebook, Twitter, etc. to publicise their blogs, they felt that they were still not making use of the maximum potential of social media to engage with a wider audience through the blogs. Some even felt that their male counterparts were more technologically savvy though they did not pinpoint to a specific reason for this.

### **Concluding reflections**

Therefore, they were of the opinion that a workshop for women bloggers would be immensely useful for them in order to familiarise themselves with technical aspects such as how to effectively promote the blog using social media, using multimedia, etc, tips on online security and safety, information on intellectual property concerns, etc.

The conclusion of this discourse was a need for women bloggers to further educate themselves on both the technical and privacy aspects of blogging.

With the boundaries of 'public' being transformed through ICTs the need for a 'digital personhood' was recently defined by German Law in terms of privacy online. This is in recognition of integrity and dignity of persons in online public spaces. Recent studies have shown that the intrusion into people's privacy is very gendered<sup>34</sup>.

### **ICTs and violence against women**

There is an urgent need for a deeper discussion on how ICTs have been used to further victimise women and girls in terms of violence and harassment. A common phenomenon has been cyber stalking – such as undetected surveillance, eavesdropping, email tampering, using hidden GPS tracking devices and new video capabilities. Use of MMS to circulate private sexual images of women through phones, 'sexting', pornography and human trafficking being the extreme examples of the use of ICT for violence against women<sup>35</sup>.

Therefore, the response to violence against women through ICTs should be at many levels – not only is it about State regulation and censorship, but also about self regulation by the industries themselves. More importantly, there should be education on self protection and privacy for women as well as the creating of counter-discourses – a good example of this is the BC Rural Women's Network sponsored Online Safety Toolkit<sup>36</sup>.

Sri Lanka's IT regulations mainly focus on commerce and governance and this is a crucial area in which clear policy recommendations need to be developed by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and other feminist think tanks on how to be responsive to the concerns of violence against women through ICTs without resorting to protectionist control and increased surveillance. It is important to generate knowledge, resources and helplines for women on how to protect themselves when using ICTs.

In the e-Government policy(2009<sup>37</sup>) there is only one section which addresses the issue of gender based violence through ICTs in terms of government work, and this is with regard to the section on email communications which reads -

“Content that is obscene, misleading or offensive to any ethnic group, gender, accepted religion, culture or to any tradition of Sri Lanka should not be sent out, and any form of harassment should not be carried out using emails on the organisation’s domain” (e-Government Policy, page 21).

However, this is only in relation to government communications and it does not state what the penalty of such acts would be, or how it can be reported.

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<sup>34</sup> Anita Gurumurthy et al (2009) for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific on “Recasting the Beijing Platform for Action Through the Information Society Lens”

<sup>35</sup> The Report to the European Parliament by the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities (2004)

<sup>36</sup> Gurumurthy et al (2009), see footnote 24

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.icta.lk/index.php/en/e-government-policy>

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UNECOSOC Committee of Experts on Public Administration (2010) *Information and communications technology and gender equality: new opportunities and challenges for public administration to implement the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals*.

## **Annex 1**

### Women Bloggers’ Meeting - Questions

1. Why did you start blogging?
2. What do you blog about?
3. What are your expectations from your blog?
4. Discussion on online security and online privacy.
5. How do you perceive yourself as a blogger?

6. Do you read other blogs?
7. How do bloggers find each other?
8. How do you publicise your blog?
9. Do you want a workshop for women bloggers and, if yes, what do you expect from such a workshop?

## **Annex 2**

NAME (Optional)					
GENDER	MALE	FEMALE			
AGE GROUP	Below 18	18-35	36-50	51-60	Above 60
EDUCATION	Below GCE O/L (Please specify)	GCE O/L	GCE A/L	Degree	Post-graduate qualification
EMPLOYMENT	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED			
COMPUTER EDUCATION	Basic Knowledge (No training)	Basic Knowledge (With training)	Intermediate		

1. How did you find out about the Nenasala?
2. When did you start using the Nenasala?
3. What did you first use it for?
4. Do you still use the Nenasala for the above purpose or are there new uses?
5. What are the new skills and knowledge you've acquired because of the Nenasala?
6. What ways has the use of Nenasala facilities helped you in linking up with others?
7. What do you understand by the term "citizenship"?
8. How did your family and neighbours react when you started using the Nenasala?
9. What are the pros and cons of women using the Nenasala?
10. Any other comments.

### **Annex 3**

#### **Questions for Minmini Test Group Baseline**

1. What were your sources of news in the past week? Name these (be specific, even with individuals)

2. What types of news do you get from the above outlets?

3. What sorts of news would you be interested in, but find difficult to access at the moment? What sorts of news would you like to have more of?

After free responses, probe also for news about women.

4. In your view, what are the most important stories relevant to women this month (Jan 2011)? What is your view on these stories? How do you think your views on these stories were formed - who or what has influenced your opinions? What actions would you like to take about the issues discussed in the above stories - if you were able? What are the things that block you from taking these actions?

5. What did you think about Minmini Women's News when you first heard about it?

6. What do you think about the news that you have received through SMS from Minmini? What types of stories or topics were most interesting to you? What was least interesting to you?

7. Have you sent any news into Minmini? Why or why not? Do you share news in any other ways - in meetings or conversations or in writing or to mainstream media? How is sharing in these contexts different from each other (and from sharing through Minmini)? What makes it easy to share news and what makes it difficult to share news?

## **ABOUT YOU**

A. Do you think of yourself more as someone who receives news or someone who shares news with others?

B. Who are the people who look to you for news or information? List types of people, numbers and locations. What is your relationship to them, or theirs to you?

C. Do you feel that you would like to play a bigger role in shaping what news other women have access to? Why or why not? If yes, what sort of role do you see yourself playing?

D. How comfortable are you using the following news media? (very, somewhat, normal, little, not at all - WHY). Roughly how many times have you used each in the past week? (0-7+, allow for more than once a day)? When did you first use each of these regularly (year/age)?

Newspapers

Internet news sites or blogs

SMS

Radio

TV

E. What social groups (formal or informal) do you consider to be important to you in your life? What do you get from these? What role do you play in these? How did you get involved in these?

F. What role would you personally like to have in relation to others in your family, community, wider society?