

Research Report

Empowering women leaders at the local level

Translating descriptive representation to
substantive representation
through ICTs

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India

Coordinated by



Gender-**IS**-Citizenship.net



Supported by



CITIGEN Asia Research Programme 2010 – 2012

Coordinated by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India (www.ITforChange.net)

Carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada (<http://publicwebsite.idrc.ca/EN/>)

This report is the outcome of a collaboration under the CITIGEN Asia Research Programme between IT for Change and a team led by Binitha V. Thampi IIT Madras (principal researcher) with Aarti Kawlra, IIT Madras, and J. Devika, CDS, Trivandrum (co-researchers).

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As the Principal Investigator of this action research project supported by IDRC and coordinated by IT for Change, Bangalore, her interest is to build a communication community of elected women representatives of local governments in Kerala to politicise them and to build a network of solidarity with the feminist movement in order to claim and their citizenship rights by carving out spaces in the public domain.

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Acknowledgements

This report is a documentation of the rationale and process of the making of *Gramamukhya*, a digital platform (www.gramamukhya.in). It has been co-created by the combined efforts of the *Gramamukhya* team, which includes not only the project's staff but also present and former women leaders of local self governing bodies of the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Malappuram and Kannur in Kerala. Beena Sanny's keen effort in the coordination of the support group comprising of nine ex-presidents has been vital to the project; as well as a continuous source of motivation for new entrants towards their own empowerment.

We as academics share a common ground with women leaders of local governments in Kerala on many accounts and acknowledge the need for a plausible exchange of information and ideas. Binitha's more than a decade long engagement with local self governments in Kerala, in different capacities, foregrounds this investigation of the gendering governance project of the state, while Aarti's experience and critical engagement in ICTs for rural application at IIT Madras, lends conviction to our efforts in building this collaborative digital platform. We jointly believe that the way forward to women's empowerment must be to utilise the democratising potential of ICTs and leverage the opportunity offered by political decentralisation for women to become equally politicised subjects in the rapidly transforming public sphere in the Information Age.

We sincerely thank the members of the CITIGEN network and IT for Change for their support in our journey as fellow researchers, both through email exchanges as well as valuable interactions during the April Workshop in New Delhi. We are especially grateful to Anita Gurusurthy for her invitation to this project and for her untiring efforts at leading the CITIGEN group across Asia. Her team was extremely professional, and we must especially mention Arpita and her impeccable project communication and management throughout.

We are happy to have collaborated with Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Thiruvananthapuram and its faculty member Dr. J. Devika, whose contribution to feminist scholarship has been an inspiration to this project. We wish to thank her for her guidance in the development of content for the website. Our collaboration with Kerala *Mahila Samakhya* Society (KMSS) in Thiruvananthapuram has also been a very valuable one and we wish to thank them for their support.

The development of the *Gramamukhya* website, its logo and user interface were done by Hareesh Mohan and Biju Philip, coordinated by Suresh K. S. who has played the crucial role of an anchor for this project. He has been responsible not only as the proxy administrator of the website but has also done numerous user trials during the course of technical workshops with women leaders. His proficiency in Malayalam translation software has been vital to the smooth usability of the website. He has coordinated all workshops with KMSS and his background in journalism and interest in feminist concerns has been very useful for our database on feminist writings and news clips in Kerala. Santhosh's experience in media and journalism in Kerala has been critical for preparing briefs on feminist writings, and in updating content on the website.

Finally, we wish to thank IIT Madras, specifically the Centre for Industrial Consultancy and Scientific Research (IC&SR) for managing, disbursing and auditing project funds and the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, for their infrastructural support.

Even though this project of empowerment of women leaders in local self government in Kerala has been a short one, we nevertheless believe that it is only the beginning and we hope that it will continue.

Binitha V Thampi

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Executive summary

The project '*Empowering Women Leaders at the Local Level: Translating Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation through ICTs*' is part of a larger Asiawide research programme on Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN) of IDRC, Canada. It explores the creation of a new technologically mediated 'invented space' for women's empowerment for revitalising 'invited spaces' of governance and to enable their active civic and political engagement at the local level in Kerala, India.

It seeks the possibility of building solidarity across differences among women through the creation of *Gramamukhya*, a digital platform, as a 'communication community' within the emerging transnational public sphere. It employs Cornwall's (2002) and Miraftab's (2004) formulation of 'invited spaces' as state-provided legitimate spaces for the participation and practice of citizenship. The reservation of quotas for women, now occupying such spaces in large numbers in local governance in Kerala, has not resulted in their substantive representation. There is, therefore, a need for a new space for their politicisation through the collective creation of a space which Miraftab has called, an 'invented space'. It is in the interaction and movement between these spaces of invitation *and* invention that the practice of citizenship becomes politically effective.

Gramamukhya, www.gramamukhya.in is envisioned as that invented space of collective deliberation and solidarity building at two levels. At the horizontal level, the platform brings together both serving and former women presidents from three *panchayats* (local level self-governing bodies) in Kerala: Thiruvananthapuram, Malappuram and Kannur. At the vertical level, the engagement is with feminist activists, scholars and collectives, women centric quasi-government meso-level institutions, women writers and diasporic migrant women workers.

The project takes as its methodological basis the feminist appropriation of technology and its specific context in the South wherein women have been known to use ICTs for creating 'transgressive spaces' to articulate against and even resist patriarchy. The building of a trans-local network of geographically dispersed women leaders across *panchayats* has provided an opportunity to explore such a possibility, which is currently in the making.

Introduction

'Empowering Women Leaders at the Local Level: Translating Descriptive Representation to Substantive Representation through ICTs in Kerala, India' is part of a larger research programme on Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN), an Asia wide initiative that aims to examine the opportunities and challenges for women's empowerment through the exploration of gender and citizenship in the emergent socio-technological paradigm of the information age. It seeks to build a theoretical framework and generate policy directions from the perspective of marginalised women in the region by calling for a politicisation of the discourse around gender and ICTs to include feminist questions of equity, power and justice.

The present project is an effort towards building an ICT-enabled community of elected women representatives of local governments in Kerala, in which women serve both as creators and users of knowledge pertaining to varied aspects of governance and also reflect upon their own positioning within. Through the politicisation of this knowledge network it is envisaged that women will be able to challenge patriarchal power and the domination they experience within self-governing institutions and local political structures. The digital platform www.gramamukhya.in has been designed to facilitate free articulation and sharing of experiences, concerns and knowledge within the network while opening up the possibility for women to critically engage with issues pertaining not only to governance but also to wider public life.

This is an action research project placed within the framework of what Miraftab has termed 'invited and invented spaces of participation' after Cornwall's (2002) formulation of 'invited spaces' in the context of her critique of participatory development. It has been argued by Cornwall and Goetz that women's political effectiveness can be gained through their "political apprenticeship - their experiences in political parties, civil society associations and the informal arenas in which political skills are learned and constituencies built" (2005). But can apprenticeship in gendered formal and informal spaces of politics, however extended, actually lead them to be politically effective in 'invited spaces'?

For Miraftab, the invitation to participate becomes a site for 'citizenship participation' only "when citizens gain meaningful opportunities to exercise voice and hold to account those who invite them to participate" (Ibid.). Taking further the idea of spatiality in citizenship for an expanded notion of feminist politics, Miraftab posits 'invited space' together with its counterpart 'invented space'- as mutually constitutive spaces referring to those

community-based arenas, where citizenship is practiced at the grassroots level. She defines ‘invited’ spaces as “the ones occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organisations that are legitimised by donors and government interventions” while ‘invented spaces’ are those “occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo” (Miraftab, 2004:1). From the perspective of a feminist politics then, it is in the interaction and movement between these spaces of invitation *and* invention, that the practice of citizenship becomes politically effective.

Our present project aims to go beyond Cornwall’s idea of political effectiveness through apprenticeship and instead seeks to interrogate the possibilities of the same through alternate ways of politicisation. The project demonstrates the potential for *real* ‘empowerment’ in the ‘invited spaces’ through the politicisation of women within another space of consciousness raising – an *invented* space, one involving self reflexivity for the creation of new political subjectivities and knowledge that eventually disrupts existing gender constructs and gender relations.

Meaningful engagement from within and outside the ‘invited spaces’ of elected office for women presidents in local governance institutions requires that women collectively *invent* spaces where they can discuss and deliberate upon issues of concern outside of the framework of gender training that has thus far been the norm in development practice. For them to claim citizenship rights, individually and collectively, a common platform to articulate such rights and share them is needed. Without such efforts towards a substantive presence, their representation in local governance will remain merely descriptive.

It is to mediate this process of transformation from descriptive to substantive representation of women leaders at the local level that this project has sought to facilitate the creation of an invented space - the *Gramamukhya* platform, and support its feminist appropriation for claiming effective citizenship.

In the following section on Background and Framework, we elaborate our conceptualisation of the following key considerations: invited and invented spaces in the context of the decentralisation process and gendering governance project in Kerala; the role of feminist organisations in mainstreaming, particularly through gender-training; the feminisation of governance within the neo-liberal logic of empowerment; invented spaces and politicisation within them; the experience of the trans-local afforded through such

spaces and finally, the feminist appropriation of technology and its articulation in the South followed by a mapping of relevant research questions pertaining to this study.

The next section on Methodology goes on to describe the rationale behind the creation of the invented space - the *Gramamukhya* platform - and discusses its co-developmental nature from the perspective of a feminist appropriation of technology-in-use. In the Findings & Discussion section, we present our observations about building solidarity across differences and our own positionality within this project. We also provide examples of shared experiences, discussions and posts by women leaders using the platform. In the section 'Conclusion and Reflections', we lay down future directions for both this action research as well as the academic inquiry stemming from it.

Background and framework

A) Invited space: Decentralisation and gendering governance in Kerala

Encouraging citizens to participate directly in processes of governance has been viewed as a means of making institutions of democracy more accountable to the people and a form of political inclusion that has meant efforts at including hitherto excluded sections of society into state-initiated 'invited spaces' (Cornwall, 2002). The argument is that locating citizens' participation in such 'invited spaces' would not only permit the voices of the marginalised to be heard within local governments but also enable them to hold their own before the wider society, including local power structures. In this report we take up for examination the 'invited spaces' created as part of state-level decentralisation processes in Kerala.

The devolution of state functions to local level institutions of self government was effected in Kerala under the statutes of the *Panchayati Raj* (local-level governance) Act of India, 1994. This constitutional amendment provided 33 percent reservation of seats in electoral positions for women in local level political bodies (which has been now increased up to 50%), an affirmative action instituted in the spirit of gender equality in representation. In a paper assessing the effective participation of elected women representatives in local *panchayats* in a select district in Kerala, Chathukulam and John (2000) observed that even though most of the leaders had acquired knowledge and skills appropriate to the elected office during a three-year period after assuming office, they had been unsuccessful in effecting change in their spheres of action and in fact, they had been subjected to patriarchal domination by male members of their political parties. There are other studies from Kerala to show how provisions of quotas in local bodies are an insufficient condition for women's political participation and effective empowerment (Devika and Thampi, 2010; Williams et.al, 2011). In this regard, it would be relevant to critically examine in some detail the underlying assumptions and practices associated with the 'invited spaces' of participation and the process of gendering governance in Kerala.

Efforts in gender mainstreaming were initiated in Kerala during the period of People's Planning Campaign¹ that evolved a set of prescriptions and associated guidelines to include

1 The implementation of 9th plan in Kerala started off with a campaign, namely, 'People's Planning Campaign' as the government decided to devolve 35-40 per cent of State budget to three tier local bodies. The campaign focused on developing a methodology for decentralised planning and governance, conducted mass training programmes, produced training materials and also drafted several government orders and circulars to institutionalise the process.

women as a category within the local governance institutions of the state. The efforts to develop a women's inclusive governance plan entailed, among others, the mandatory provisioning of ten percent of the Plan's funds exclusively for women beneficiaries, termed as the 'Women Component Plan' (WCP). This involves the consideration of practical and strategic gender needs to formulate projects under the WCP which, however, has not delivered on account of the fact that the State has virtually no conceptualisation of such needs that are relevant at the local level and nor do the women leaders themselves (Thampi, 2004).

Yet another attempt in gender mainstreaming in local governance in the State has been the fair representation of women in varied decision making forums for local level planning and governance. Fifty percentage reservation for women in local bodies is a recent instance of policy measures in this regard. However, such policies assume 'automatic' transformation on the ground while at the same time not being cognisant of how the intervention interacts with existing power structures and relations at the local level. This has also been pointed out by critics who question the transformation potential for women through these policies (Williams et. al 2011). Moreover, critical evaluation of the success of these women in local governance has revealed that, while they are competent in their role as managers of developmental programmes, they are far removed from local political institutions and associated power leading us to question gender mainstreaming itself.

In a critical evaluation of a gender mainstreaming project in a paper titled "Mainstreaming Gender or Streaming Gender Away", Mukhopadhyay asserts that gender mainstreaming has involved "the integration of *gender equality concerns* into the analyses and formulation of all policies, programmes and projects, in organisational practice [and] this has increasingly come to signify that gender equality goals can be achieved solely by increasing the number of women within [the] organisation and in positions of decision making" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004:98-9). In Kerala, these reforms have meant efforts at women's 'empowerment' and an uncritical affirmation of 'gendered knowledge' mainly through specially designed training workshops by state-level institutions such as the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) and collaborations with grass-roots feminist organisations like *Sakhi*. We now briefly examine the role played by feminists in the gender mainstreaming project of the state government in Kerala.

i. Mainstreaming through gender-training

It may be useful to see how the decentralisation process and planning of the state government also influenced the nature of feminist activism in Kerala from the mid 90's onwards. During the 1980s, the feminist movement involved the mobilisation of women largely through shared narrations of experiences on subordination and oppression in women's collectives such as *Anweshi*, *Sakhi*, *Kerala Streevedi*, and *Sahaja*, and activism revolved around public demonstrations, speak outs, and collective reflections. This mode of mobilisation continued till the early 1990's even though it was not necessarily a unified movement, and there were differences from within. But from the 90's, 'empowerment' became the catch word and many of these collectives and individual feminists refocused and unconditionally accepted this idea of empowerment both within their institutional context and in their collaborative endeavours which were mutually interactive. The real impact of this mutual exchange on mobilisation and larger politics is a matter of separate debate. However, the uncritical acceptance of gender training as the major tool for women's empowerment is the point of interrogation in this project.

Many feminist activists in Kerala took the gender mainstreaming project as an opportunity to engage with a wider audience, achieve their goals through the new instruments of gender training provided by the State and simultaneously also achieve legitimacy for their work. While this did in fact lead to enhanced visibility and spread of women's organisations in Kerala through its linguistic re-framing as "gender-training", a phrase commonly heard even at tea-shops in Kerala, many feminist scholars themselves view this feminist co-optation of gender mainstreaming in Kerala, as a failed feminist politics. For them, "the political project of equality ... [is] being normalised in the development business as an ahistorical, apolitical, de-contextualised and technical project that leaves the prevailing and unequal power relations intact" (Mukhopadhyay, 2004:100).

This is amply evident in the case of *Sakhi*, a feminist organisation in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, that works to mainstream gender into the political discourse of the state government through gender equity interventions in governance policies and programmes. What is distinctive about *Sakhi* is its involvement with Kerala state's decentralisation process from its very inception through its association with the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) which advocated the setting aside of up to 40% of the Ninth Five Year Plan's budget towards projects and programmes to be drawn up by the *panchayats* themselves (Vijayan, 2004).

In her paper, “Decentralisation Process and Women: The Case of Kerala, India”, Vijayan outlines *Sakhi*’s engagement with the state government’s decentralisation process, and in particular their intervention in the planning process “so as to make gender concerns central to the decision making regarding allocation of resources and to secure practical and strategic gender interests ...” (ibid. :30-1). She goes on to show how they conducted gender-training focused interventions at the *panchayat* level. These ‘gender-training’ programmes included sensitising male members to the issue of women’s concerns. Vijayan observes that “...these training workshops allowed men to talk about gender issues for the first time, get acquainted with the women members’ perspective and since all of this was happening in a non-confrontational and non-threatening atmosphere, men conceded that it was time for a change” (Vijayan 2004: 35). For Vijayan, women’s needs can best be articulated through self help groups that provide the possibility of a collective “but only if these groups are exposed to social and development issues and are able to organise themselves as pressure groups” (ibid: 37). With regard to the elected women leaders, who are sharply divided along party lines, and do not have a common identity, “their gender perspectives have to be strengthened so as to counter patriarchal structures of the parties and institutions of government” (ibid).

Here Vijayan sees transformation from patriarchy to a gender-just society as a non-confrontational linear process that is possible through gender training as the principal tool for transformation and where empowerment is seen in terms of developing varied skills. Our contention is that *Sakhi*’s efforts at mainstreaming did not recognise the need of grassroots feminist mobilisation around state constituted categories of ‘women’ for a continued resistance, negotiation and alteration of patriarchal power embedded within institutional structures both within and outside the State.

By taking up “gender-training” in local governance as their own agenda, *Sakhi* no doubt gained immense visibility as a women’s organisation, but lost the critical distance that feminists need to keep with the state and its institutions. This ‘governmentalisation’ of feminist activism in the late 1990’s in Kerala has been viewed by many feminist scholars as “feeding the general eagerness of political society and conservative forces to ‘protect’ women – which may effectively deny women agency, confer the authority of the protector to the former, and indirectly approve of the penalising of women who do not stay within the protector’s gender ideals” (Devika and Sukumar 2006:4473).

Even feminist scholars from other parts of the country have observed that ‘gender-training’ has been the predominant mode of increasing gender awareness, skills development and capacity building for change through the persona of the ‘gender-trainer’ who, whether as a representative of the state programme or that of a feminist organisation, has preferred to remain within the framework of development rather than encourage political mobilisation among women for transformation of unequal gender relations. Dasgupta, a gender trainer herself, critically reflects that this was indeed “a failure of the women’s movement, which did not grasp the political opportunity presented by the constitutional amendment” (Dasgupta, 2007: 32-3).

Dasgupta points out that feminists all over India had to grapple with the ‘development project approach’ and its demands of ‘engendered’ programmes in development institutions, including gender planning, gender budgeting and gender training. However, this “anxiety to operationalise gender within development practice led to a subtle cooption...” leading to a focus on ‘inputs’, ‘outputs’, ‘impacts’ and ‘best practices’ promoting formulaic notions of gender (Dasgupta, 2007:28-9). She laments that “feminists did not organise political groups around ... government ‘classification’ of women as the beneficiaries, but preferred to engage in development work” (ibid.33).

Upon reflection and based upon first-hand experience in gender training² it is clear that the notion of ‘training’ carries within it the expectation that a short module would enable long-term transformation and social change. Its rigid framework of structured and time-bound training modules, often in class room instruction mode and in language and terminologies that appear alien, provides prescriptions formulated outside the context of its dissemination. Furthermore, training presumes a hierarchy between trainer and trainee with the emergence of a new ‘expert’ group of gender-trainers legitimised by the state and civil society and who are immune to the subjection of power. Moreover, the skills imparted are expected to be an universal panacea, which when applied often lead trainees to be disappointed about their own lives with the realisation that lives of their gender-trainer compatriots are indeed insulated from prevailing gender norms. Building such a relationship of unequals between women is not only a hindrance but also antithetical to feminist activism itself.

Again, the focus of gender-training on individual transformation precludes the coming together of a number of women to build solidarity, based on shared experiences. Such a

² Binitha worked as a gender trainer at Kerala Institute for Local Administration (KILA) in engendering governance processes during early 2000’s.

framework is not conducive to the horizontal networking of women hailing from diverse backgrounds and dispersed geographies, and prevents their mutual exchange and learning. Finally, a cursory glance at the gender training manuals of both the state and those of experts from feminist organisations reveals an infantilising of women trainees, which clearly indicates gender-training's top-down pedagogy³, however avowedly participatory. We now go on to question the stated success of these gender mainstreaming efforts.

ii. Feminisation of governance

The state believes that its gender mainstreaming effort initiated during the mid-90s has been successful and resulted in what they call the 'feminisation of governance at local level' (Chakraborty et.al 2010). This includes, apart from institutionalising gender training, increasing quotas for women to 50% and creating a state-wide network of self- help groups of women or *Kudumbashree*, who have been envisioned to work together with local self governing bodies in the state. Further, it also entails a gender responsive budgeting through the institution of WCP⁴ (Issac, 2010). But what has this kind of 'feminisation' offered to women who have entered into the governance process?

As we know, this 'invited space' of governance is also a political arena of negotiation, a place of intersecting interests – of local bureaucrats, non-governmental organisations and political parties at different levels. Hence women who enter into this 'invited space' get exposed not only to formal governance processes but also to the broader arena of local politics. Nevertheless, what we see is that there exists an apparent gendered division between these two arenas of governance and politics, of which women are assigned to the former. This process of 'feminisation of governance', as noted, has transformed the invited spaces into a feminine space, led by elected women presidents and supported by an army of female unpaid voluntary workers of the *kudumbashree* network. This has been well demonstrated by the increasing participation of women in *grama sabhas* (Nair, 2008). The invocation of feminine nature as a means of achieving bureaucratic efficiency (such as their acquiescence to rules and regulations, convivial interpersonal relations, etc.) in governance and the consequent circumscription of their role as *development managers* of local governing bodies rather than as *political agents*, has lead us to question claims of

3 It is true that even within the invented space there is some amount of technical training – mainly in the form of computer literacy. During our numerous workshops with women leaders in the selected districts, our effort had been all along to view the use of ICTs as tools towards something larger than mere technical skills development – that of horizontal sharing among equals and the importance of building a women's collective.

4 Women Component Plan

‘empowerment’ of women since the commencement of gendering governance efforts in Kerala.

B) Invented space and politicisation within

Having discussed the various measures of the State in achieving their goals of feminisation in governance, which limited women leaders’ spheres of action in the realm of politics to that of efficient development managers within governance, we now discuss the need and politicisation potential of another space, an ‘invented space’ – a space within which women’s political subjectivities may be realised.

Recapitulating Miraftab’s framework, we note that ‘invited spaces’ are “the ones occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organisations that are legitimised by donors and government interventions” while ‘invented’ spaces are those “occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo” (Miraftab, 2004:1). Following Miraftab, we reassert that the invitation to participate becomes a site for ‘citizenship participation’ only “when citizens gain meaningful opportunities to exercise voice and hold to account those who invite them to participate” (2004). We have already seen that this is not always the case for women in governance who are now occupying the invited spaces in large numbers. From the perspective of a feminist politics then, it is in the interaction and movement between these spaces of invitation *and* invention, that the practice of citizenship becomes politically effective.

While Miraftab’s formulation of the ‘invented space’ is a space of oppositional civil society in a mode of resistance to hegemonic structures and power, in the context of this project, the invented space is occupied by those women grassroots actors who have been legitimised by the State to act on its behalf. This invented space would be then used by them as a space to build up the much needed resistance to transform the status quo in the invited spaces of governance. Hence, the invented space outlined in this project involves a process of consciousness building and creation of new political subjectivities and agency among women in governance through a self-initiated, shared deliberation in a language that they collectively articulate.

It has been observed that women do not use their positioning in local governance as a spring board to move to higher levels of politics (Devika & Thampi, 2010). They are

prevented from developing their own political aspirations, and local governance is seen as a realm of developmental activism rather than that of politics. An examination of the biographies of a majority of women *panchayat* leaders reveals that most do not have a background of party politics making it all the more difficult for them to enter that realm (Ibid). This suggests that real empowerment in the invited spaces of governance can only occur through a politicisation in the ‘invented space’ of their own. Reservation for women through constitutional amendments presumes that by including women into positions of local governance they will also be included into the ‘political arena’ from which they were hitherto excluded. We have already noted how the arena of politics is in fact denied to women who are assigned instead to apolitical tasks of administration and development management at the local level. To claim a legitimate place in this political realm as political agents invariably calls for articulation of collective needs and rights which, as we have already seen, does not necessarily take place through state-led empowerment programmes but can happen within what we suggest is the ‘invented space’ of local governance.

Women’s real empowerment can take place only through their politicisation and involves a process of self-interrogation and resistance to existing gender norms both within the public and private domains. Their engagement in politics as active agents then clearly involves the construction of new meanings of ‘politics’ and for which, we believe, the local arena of politics, including its ideals and practice, must itself be transformed. A mere participation in the invited spaces of governance or honing of skills therein and conforming to feminine virtues of ‘efficiency’ in governance while performing ‘caring labours’ (MacGregor, 2004) will only maintain the gendered status quo. Instead, personal and collective empowerment is possible only if they build collective politics and critically evaluate their own positioning within the invited spaces. Following Hannah Arendt (1958), it is when people act politically and appear as citizens in public that they are allowed to express ‘who’ they are. This public appearance, through speech and action, ‘does not cement the private self but disrupts it in the creation of something entirely new, something that cannot be grounded in or predicted by private life’ (Sandilands 1999, 160; MacGregor, 2004:71). This is where an *invented space* becomes relevant for women to both proclaim and reclaim their collective politics.

The hegemonic idea of women’s empowerment through ‘capacity building’ and ‘self help’ enshrined within state-initiated invited spaces, we have seen, ensures the selective opening up of some spaces for women while closing other political spaces as a strategy for achieving ‘development’ through efficient governance. This can be read as a result of the

post-colonial Indian State's involvement in the ideology and practice of neo-liberalism through an alteration of its welfare role by "mainstreaming empowerment" whose logic is constructed within transnational discourses of development (Sharma, 2006). In this framework of governmentality 'citizens' are reframed as consumers of neo-liberal capitalism. This is amply evident from Kerala's *kudumbashree* initiative that has unleashed an entire army of female self-help workers as 'agents' of their own development. They are constituted as 'producers' through micro-enterprises on the one hand and on the other as 'consumers' within global capital and markets. The management of such a project is now increasingly being entrusted on to local governing bodies in the name of empowerment. Reclaiming the meaning of empowerment is therefore one of the political projects of women within invited spaces of governance. Becoming increasingly aware of the state's neoliberal agenda and its politics of inclusion therefore is a necessary condition for their politicisation.

i. Bounded spaces and experience of the trans-local

Having discussed the political rationale for the creation of a new space for and by women in governance – the 'invented space', we now discuss the spatial characteristics of this invented space and its trans-local potential. 'Invited spaces' are state-defined geographically demarcated administrative spaces within whose boundaries the actors must limit their sphere of action. But bounded action within a bureaucratic, vertical structure is rarely empowering. Studies have revealed the link between women's empowerment through mobility across borders to create new subjectivities and agency underscoring the importance of movement across spatially limiting boundaries (Nair, 2007).

The invented space, on the other hand, we believe, has to overcome these limitations of geographical boundedness. It must therefore be a space that can overcome geographical boundedness and enable communication and exchange across different groups within a potentially inclusive and democratic framework. ICT-mediated virtual spaces of interaction have the potential to enable users to cut across physical barriers to communication by taking place in cyberspace. Such digital spaces can facilitate the creation of a network of users that are spread across horizontally and vertically, thereby creating the possibility of different levels of interaction. There are many examples of women leaders who have resisted prevailing patriarchal structures from within the invited spaces of local governance, and have even come out to stand on their own. Yet, currently there is no mechanism for sharing their experience with others who are still serving their term as elected representatives in order to build solidarity without having to deal with issues of

geographical separation. Indeed, women's own political aspirations can be developed from this fertile ground in the invented space while remaining within the invited spaces of governance.

Nancy Fraser (2007) in her critique of the liberal model of bourgeois public sphere has pointed out the existence of multiple publics in stratified societies and calls for a radicalisation of such 'counterpublics' to ensure full access and real parity of participation to those whom that model excluded, including women. She maps the 'communications community' as one of the four communities⁵ in an inclusive public sphere in which common interests can be created/or discovered through open democratic communication. But communication in the present age of the Internet and digital technologies, she asserts, is now increasingly taking place in "de-territorialized cyberspace" (Fraser, 2007:19) which "imposes a dematerialization of communication and in many of its aspects a transformation of the subject position of the individual who engages with it" (Poster 1997: 262) and hence is potentially democratising. Creation of such an ICT-mediated communication community as an invented space at the local level of governance also requires innovative strategies for women to leverage this potential.

Sharing one's circumstances with other women who are similarly situated, and engaging horizontally in learning and knowledge sharing based on experiences can indeed initiate a long-term process of solidarity building among women in politics. Such an invented space provides the scope to get widely connected and find solidarity with women in other arenas, including in feminist activism, writing and in higher politics while themselves aspiring such positions. Such a virtual platform can also become a trans-local arena for interactions between diasporic women who have the rich experience of effectively negotiating with patriarchy gained through mobility. The significance of building such transnational relations through this invented space becomes all the more critical when viewed from the point of view of transnational women workers often subject to varied forms of exploitation within the global capitalist economy, who now have access to local women leaders back home during times of crises.

It must be noted that online interactions have the potential to enable radical collective action in offline contexts as has been noted in recent ICT escalated protest movements and revolutions that took place in the Middle East. This transaction between the online and

⁵ According to Nancy Fraser (2007) these are: 1) The imagined community, or nation; 2) the political (or civic) community, or citizenry; 3) the communications community, or public; and 4) the community of fate, or the set of stakeholders affected by various developments (included here is "community of risk"). (Fraser, 2005 http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.htm).

offline contexts we believe holds the possibility for a practice of citizenship that furthers democracy although we realise that it may not necessarily be smooth .

In advancing this approach to women's agency and political empowerment through the mutually constituting 'invited' and 'invented' spaces of local governance, we hope that a negotiation of boundaries can take place for a transformation of women's spaces hitherto bounded.

C) Feminist appropriation of technology

Existing literature on ICT-mediated communities have tended to focus on their dichotomous characterisations – virtual/real, online/offline, individual/collective - denying the existence of a “continuum of communities, identities and networks” cutting across these oppositional categories (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 456). Wilson and Peterson, suggest the importance exploring the wider socio-cultural, political and gender context within which the ICT-mediated discourse takes place for understanding the dynamics of interaction among members of digital communities. In order to contextualise our framework of invited-invented spaces into an operational one for the creation of an ICT-mediated communications community of women leaders at the local level, it would be useful to examine feminist literature on technology to understand strategies of appropriation for an effective politicisation across online and offline contexts.

Feminist debates on technology, as we shall see, point to how gender-based relations of power can be influenced, and indeed altered, through strategic engagements with technology. Early eco-feminism took an anti-technology stand and posited technology as essentially masculine, asserting its interventionist role as being highly destructive of nature and women's bodies (Mies & Shiva 1993). Instead of rejecting technology altogether, others have acknowledged that the interaction between women and technology needs equal attention to that between women and nature. Feminist philosophers of science and technology such as Harding (1986) and Haraway (1988) view the relation between gender and technology as a dialectical one highlighting the processes, practices and interactions by which technology is developed/used and gender subjectivities come into play rather than the essential characteristics of the two. According to this formulation, technology refers, not only to technical artefacts but also, to the associated socio-cultural context, including constructions of gender relations, such that the two are mutually constitutive or co-produced (Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner & Lohan, 2004; Wajcman, 2000; 2009).

Exploring the design and use of technologies from a feminist lens would thus bring to light how presumptions about gender are in fact part of the design of technical artefacts and systems but, equally, that these may be attributed to have different meanings and uses with multiple interpretations. Whereas in earlier non-constructivist feminist approaches⁶ the role of technology in reinforcing existing gender inequalities was accentuated, in contemporary feminist studies of technology, the emphasis is on women's agency and the prospect of change that technological developments herald (Wajcman 2009:5). The coming of information and communication technologies has enhanced the possibilities of women's empowerment through technologies bringing in a "new relationship between women and machines" and the renewed possibilities of transforming gender relations (Wajcman 2009: 5-6).

Some feminists have taken a middle ground between complete rejection and earnest endorsement of technology and instead have encouraged women to be more technically self-reliant and become active consumers of technologies. They insist that women must critically intervene and engage with the processes of designing technologies employing a woman-centric, needs-based perspective rather than from that of the existing technology and its application (Faulkner, 2001).

Identifying women's needs and priorities in the design of IT systems, however, presumes an universalistic understanding of women across social classes, nationalities and cultures and tends to stall feminist design initiatives. Therefore, instead of focusing upon user-centric product features, feminists now emphasise the importance of moving toward the processes of developing the product in tandem with its women users suggesting a technology (and gender) in the making (Rosser, 2005:13). Indeed, as Suchman (1994), following Haraway has shown, "feminism offers a way to begin to replace the designer/user opposition" and "reconstructing relevant social relations that cross the boundaries between them" (1994: 22, 25)

i. Feminist appropriation of ICTs in the South

The capacity of women users to interrogate and interpret technologies to their own advantage however, depends on their broader economic and social circumstances, and is evident in the case of the use of ICTs, particularly the Internet, in the South where questions of access to the technology and its associated skills are seen by cyber feminists

⁶ These referred to issues pertaining to 'women *in* technology' and 'women *and* technology' wherein the former refers to questions of equality and access for women and the latter to their victimization (or emancipation) in the use of certain technologies (Faulkner and Lohan, 2004).

as insufficient conditions for women's appropriation of ICTs. (Gajjala and Mamidipudi 1999; Gajjala, 2002; Nair 2002; Huyer and Sikoska 2003; Arun, Heeks and Morgan 2004; Best and Maier 2007; Mukhopadhyay and Nandi, 2007; Gurumurthy, 2008). The two pertinent questions related to effective use of ICTs by women are:

“First, will women in the South be able (allowed) to use new technologies under conditions that are contextually empowering to them, because they are defined by women themselves? Second, within which Internet based contexts can women from the South truly be heard? How can they define the conditions under which they can interact on-line, to enable them to form coalitions and collaborate, aiming to transform social, cultural, and political structures? (Gajjala and Mamidipudi 1999: 4-5).

The gender and ICT for development policy literature stresses the need for recognising that not only is technology not gender-neutral but also that “women themselves have multiple identities – for example of class, ethnicity, caste, race, age – and that these interplay with gender to define women's access to technology” (Gurumurthy 2004:4-5). Furthermore, feminist advocacy questions the private sector ‘push’ models of market-led ICT access which pay only lip service to the specificities of women's empowerment, intensifying their structural marginalisation through reinforcement of existing gender biases and inequalities.

Instead, they suggest the ‘unpacking’ of ‘access’ to ICTs in the context of its actual use and ‘appropriation’ within a developmental framework informed by the capabilities approach, and managed as a public good, for a more just strategy of harnessing the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment (Arun, Heeks and Morgan 2004; Gurumurthy, Singh and Kovacs 2008). Access in this context does not imply the passive use and social adaptation of a local community to received technology packages, content and applications and instead involves

“...enabling appropriation through processes that (re)position women and other marginalised groups from passive ‘users’ to active co-creators of the technology – creating new technology meanings and new technology uses.... Essentially, the investment is for a process of acculturation: not of the acculturation of the community to the IS [Information Society] possibilities but rather, of making ICTs and the Internet relevant to their needs.” (Gurumurthy 2008:7)

Feminist scholars view ICTs not as mere tools but as the basis for the construction of new social realities leading to considerable “shifts in local gender norms” and in that sense possessing significant transformative potential (Gurumurthy 2008:6; Gurumurthy, Singh and Kovacs 2008). From a gender and development perspective then, empowerment refers

to the altering and shifting of existing relations of power and social status defined by gender roles and in fact entails the “control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, intangible); control over ideology (beliefs, values, attitudes); and changes in the institutions and structures that support unequal power relations” (Rao and Kelleher 2005:62).

The emphasis in the empowerment approach to Gender and ICT therefore is on women, not as individual users but, as collective users of ICT’s for social *and* political change (Huyer and Sikoska 2003; Gurumurthy 2008; Gurumurthy, Singh and Kovacs 2008). There are numerous cases of ICT mediated community networks serving a variety of social, economic and political empowerment goals for women (Gheyntanichi 2001; Martinez and Reilly 2002; Zorn 2004; Skalli 2006; Ahmar 2006; Pavarala, Malik & Cheeli, 2006; Sengupta et. al 2007; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Chib and Hsueh-Hua Chen 2011) through the creation of what Skalli (2006) has termed “transgressive spaces” for them. The innovative “virtual community” of women co-creators, participants and users of ICT, in turn have the potential for not only building transparency and accountability in the design and use of ICT, but also serve to give *voice* to their own expression and even legitimise it. Prevalent feminist rights-based ICT policies thus advocate the building of self motivated women’s groups around the use of localised digital media to enable their mobilisation for transformative collective action.

ii. Why feminists should engage with ICTs: A view from women in higher politics in the South

The feminist positions on women and technology was recently discussed by some members of the present project team with women political leaders from Asia Pacific region in the conference held at East Timor in October 2011. The meeting deliberated upon the question of why and how feminists should engage with emergent technologies of communication. Most of the participants were senior women and agreed that their existing tools of mobilisation were not reaching the youth who are in fact vital to the feminist movement and need to be attracted to it. Social media tools enable this access and can be used with ease for their mobilisation and social transformation. Also, its outreach to women from different sections of society, including housewives is particularly effective. It also has the ability to further expand the participation of women in the public domain by bringing more women into debates and discussions within networks of exchange across countries in the South.

Its potential to by-pass mainstream media, often controlled by the State, for building public opinion is significant for feminists. Women leaders working within the confines of authoritative and regulatory regimes such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea expressed the significance of this technology as a space for subversion against State censorship. In times of crises, they felt that such technologies are especially useful in reaching out to large numbers of people in short duration and mobilising support. They pointed out that meaningful transactions between the offline and online are possible only when this online knowledge sharing and building feeds into the offline activism of women.

Apart from its enabling potential, the leaders pointed out whether mere access and use of ICT is enough for women's empowerment. Liza Maza, national president of the Gabriela Women's Party from Philippines highlighted the issue of women's control over these technologies. She raised the question of whether 'ownership' and 'control' over these technologies can become the site for feminist struggle given the increasing role of the Internet as itself an instrument of surveillance and control. She pointed out that the digital divide is making women vulnerable in many countries where they have to face issues of access to the same which is further exacerbated by their time constraints. This is even more a problem given that one has to sift through the massive amounts of "information garbage" for something relevant to one's needs using these technologies. The content is also not free from gender stereotyping of women under dominant patriarchy evident in the new forms of sexualisation and exploitation of women possible through these technologies. The group collectively reflected on these concerns pertaining to ICTs and came to the conclusion that it is precisely to face and overcome these constraints that ICTs themselves must be used as sites for struggle for women.

From the discussions of women leaders from the Asia Pacific region it is evident that feminists should engage with ICTs and appropriate them to their advantage for building a collective politics. Such a process would also involve risks and dilemmas in taking decisions pertaining to the actual design and use of these technologies. Taking such risks is inevitable in the wider effort of creating an ICT mediated communication community as an "invented space" for women leaders in the South. The research questions that lead to this direction are as framed below.

Research questions

Our action research in this project has involved the following questions.

- How does one build political solidarity among women across differences at different levels?
- To what extent can women in local governance employ ICTs to transform their participation substantively in the public domain in Kerala?
- What are the strategies for their effective politicisation as against efforts at gender mainstreaming?
- What does the feminist appropriation of technology involve in the context of creating *Gramamukhya* digital platform?
- How can meaningful transactions be made between online and offline contexts at individual and collective levels?

Methodology

We have thus far discussed the need of a space for articulation and self-reflection for women *panchayat* presidents in Kerala and the enabling features of this invented space for feminist activism and transformation within the invited space of local governance. The present section of our action research deals with the methodological standpoints and precautions that have informed the process of building such a space within this project. It deals with the question of building solidarity across differences and simultaneously considers the feminist appropriation of technology for building an ICT mediated women's collective.

Having discussed the nature and need for building the invented space as a communication community of elected women presidents, we deliberate upon the politics of solidarity building at both horizontal (insider) and vertical (outsider) levels. The question of 'insider' and 'outsider' while building solidarity among a group has been discussed in the literature on feminist praxis. Iris Young (1986) has rightly noted that "a group supposedly representative of a common interest and experience, its members are necessarily going to be heterogeneous in some respects. Such groups are then necessarily going to be confronted with questions of difference. Any autonomous group that is going to represent the interests of, say, women is going to both consist of and represent women from different classes and ethnic backgrounds, with different sexual preferences, cultures, experiences, etc. It seems well nigh impossible to have groups whose members will have no significant differences among themselves, despite the commonalities of their oppression and of the interests that bind them together". Uma Narayan (1988) hence acknowledges that, "working together continuously across our differences" seems to be a project we cannot get away from.

In our project, there are significant differences among 'insiders' in terms of affiliation to party politics, which Vijayan (2004) sees as a major hindrance to their collectivisation. Hence, building solidarity both across horizontal and vertical networks has to be a process of working across differences. Here, the horizontal refers to the networking among women presidents of local governments in the state, where as vertical refers to their networking with women's organisations, feminist scholars, activists, women writers, migrant women workers etc. We acknowledge and seek to work on this 'difference' while facilitating the process of building this communication community as an invented space of elected women presidents and particularly focus on deliberations over differences. This, we hope, would

result in collectively rebuilding the gender lens that is currently shadowed within the mainstreaming discourse and through which new meanings of empowerment and politicisation can be created, and strategies to bargain with patriarchy, devised in specific contexts.

Our first step in building the communication community has involved networking at the horizontal level constituting serving women leaders in local governance. One twenty six women leaders from three districts⁷ – Trivandrum, Malappuram and Kannur became members of this platform and included a ‘Support Group’ of nine select former *panchayat* presidents who have struggled and emerged successful against the exercise of power within their spheres of action in their previous two to three terms in office (See Annexure II (4) for narratives of experiences shared by a few former presidents and members of the Support Group). Their past experience and specific strategies of negotiation employed become valuable for new entrants. Furthermore, in this project they play a role of mediating between serving presidents and the project research team in facilitating the digital forum.

There are also linkages being made at the vertical level in this project. The first collaboration was with Kerala *Mahila Samakhya* Society (KMSS) a quasi-governmental organisation engaged in mobilising and empowering women through education. *Mahila Samakhya* in different states of the country has in fact shown us how a government initiated institution focusing on education can address effectively many other issues relevant to women such as child abuse, dowry, sexual harassment etc. Hence networking with such meso-level organisations is part of the solidarity building exercise in this project. The second collaboration was with Centre for Development Studies (CDS), a research institution in Kerala known for its rich empirical research including women’s issues with regard to labour, self help groups, governance etc. and J. Devika, a member of its faculty and a feminist scholar in her own right, in consultation with whom the content for the digital platform has been planned. The process of content generation is ongoing and women leaders who are users of the platform along with members of the support group are also engaged in the same.

⁷ These districts not only represent south, central and north Kerala but also cover its political party variation – Trivandrum is more or less equal in LDF (Left Democratic Front) and UDF (United Democratic Front) composition, while Malappuram is predominantly UDF and Kannur, LDF. Malappuram, in spite of being a Muslim dominated district with low literacy rates, demonstrated a successful implementation of the *Askhaya* programme.

Another methodological issue is that of feminist appropriation of technology. It raises the question of *how* technology can be appropriated for feminist goals. We have already seen how the global feminist, rights based approach to ICTs has viewed the potential of digital technologies as being able to give “voice” to women often in “transgressive spaces” that they can call as their own for citizenship in countries in the Third World. But feminist scholars writing on the effective use of ICTs in the South, we have already seen, have cautioned us that unless women are truly empowered to define the conditions under which they interact online and to form meaningful trans-local alliances towards transforming their personal and political contexts, the mere access to and use of ICTs will not amount to a feminist appropriation of technology.

Therefore we neither undertook gender training in this project nor did we engage merely as ICT trainers for women leaders. Ours was not a mere facilitation for the adoption and adaptation of technology for its own sake. Ensuring basic technical literacy⁸ and ease of use of computers and the Internet was an important part of this project only to enable women to creatively use them as tools for furthering their personal and political empowerment. Our wider goal has been to stress the need to collectively reflect on the politics behind the use of technology by women for their collectivisation and to facilitate a discussion about the same among them. As our deliberations in East Timor well established, it was more important for women to gain a perspective on ICTs for their effective appropriation rather than merely learn how to use them.

The workshops conducted were therefore free flowing and discussed the question of women’s access to existing ICT (computers and the Internet) facilities both at home and the *panchayat* office and to deliberate upon challenges faced by women in using the same. It was also suggested that the participants take advantage of opportunities provided by the state government for computer literacy at local *Akshaya* centres and at exclusive computer training programmes of Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA). Our interactions at the workshops also stressed the importance of technology, not as something alien, to be feared or rejected, but as a given fact of present day existence - and that it was imperative that any perceived obstacles to its use be overcome. A favourite example at workshops was the case of the mixer and grinder and pressure cooker which presented many a difficulty to

8 In Kerala the high literacy rate among women, together with its associated functionalities, is an enabling factor with regard to both ICT access and use. The e-governance initiatives of the Kerala state have further ensured the presence of ICT infrastructure like *Akshaya*, in all local governing institutions. Moreover, compared to other regions, elected women presidents from Kerala are much better educated with considerable experience in heading institutions such as schools and government offices.

women when they were first introduced but which eventually had to be surmounted. It was also important to discuss the sexualisation of content on the Internet, a concern raised by the leaders, and their perception of its socially harmful impact, in order to alleviate their fears about the same.

Lessons from the history of personal computers⁹ have shown us that technology has both unintended consequences and possibilities - sometimes conforming to the intentions of its designers and stakeholders and sometimes contradicting them, thereby making invisible the social vision and contextual idiom that originally informed its technical features (Pfaffenberger 1988, Latour 1988). It is for this reason that the project's methodology focuses upon not just the feminist appropriation of technology but of feminist appropriation of *technology-in-use*. Often digital portals are generic and de-historicised for universal application and precisely for that reason antithetical to their feminist appropriation.

It is in the interest of reinstating *intentionality* into ICTs, which are often sterile and designed for general all-purpose use that this project seeks to develop a digital platform as an open space that allows for a gradual process of inclusion of members and their specific intentions across different levels. It should be noted here that in the Kerala context of local self governance, the existing communicative practices and norms of dominant governance structures, media and discourse, are not shared by the women leaders and moreover at variance with their specific needs and concerns. Keeping in mind the distinctive requirements of women in local governance in Kerala has been critical to creating this digital platform for their effective appropriation.

The digital platform was therefore envisioned as an evolving shared space for knowledge networking, reflection and self expression. Its User Interface (UI), for that reason, was developed through an iterative process in tandem with the various users of the platform – women presidents, members of the support group, feminist scholars, the project team and partners – to suit their ease of use, collective requirements and changing goals. We have therefore worked with transliteration software into Malayalam using an English keyboard. The challenge of adapting pre-existing collaborative web portal templates only compounds

9 In his article on “The Social Meaning of the Personal Computer: Or, Why the Personal Computer Revolution Was No Revolution” Bryan Pfaffenberger recalls how even though the PC was meant to democratise the use of computers it failed to express this political vision of its innovators : “Just as the agents of regularisations sought to build domination, patriarchy, and centralisation into computer systems, only to find that in many cases the technology backfired on them by providing new roles for skilled labour, so too did the agents of reconstitution-seeking, this time, freedom, autonomy, and decentralisation--find that the new technology they created was all too easily brought back within the framework of domination (Pfaffenberger 1988, 46).

the issue and makes the user interface all the more difficult to suit the developing and continuously changing needs of the platform's users. Redefining the conventional category of FAQs ('Frequently Asked Questions') on the portal was important for us given that the platform has been envisioned as a collaborative space for collective sharing, reflection for common concerns and finding solutions and not a one-to-many format for posting pre-determined queries with standard, one-size fits all answers. It was only after numerous discussions with women leaders on issues pertaining to governance and their own personal transformation within it that led to the idea of introducing a space for videos of public speeches of prominent women public figures in the website. The visual documentation of this process of development of the website is available in Annexure II(5) and shows Version 1.0 and Version 2.0 of the platform indicating the features that needed to be changed based on feedback from women leaders during technical workshop sessions with them.

It has been crucial therefore to focus, in this project on the actual *process* for the development and design of the digital platform such that it serves to support relevant and meaningful interaction among equals, and enables individual and collective political transformation. As in advances in the development of software, iterative methodologies involving numerous loops of feedback from multiple stakeholders (Dittrich, Eriksen &Wessels, 2009; Kling 2000) are critical to the building of ICT-mediated communities. Negotiations, transparency and constructive discourse between the various actors and agents are central to the design process as is its flexibility in the face of limitations and challenges in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Dittrich et. al. 2009; Zorn 2004; Oudshoorn et.al. 2004; Chopella & Srivathsan 2009). It is this ongoing co-developmental nature of the digital platform that we present in this project.

Creating a socio-technical system that is open-ended and a design-in-use, in continuous discussion and feedback with its users, is in fact the specific strategy for the feminist appropriation of ICTs within this project. And, given that the intention of the project has been for women leaders to gradually begin to *own* the platform, decisions pertaining to the administration and maintenance of the platform, such as its domain registration and server space need to be taken. The process of such ICT design development over a period of time in tandem with its users contravenes the logic of the dominant corporate delivery and technological diffusion of the ICT model, and may not be free from unanticipated risks.

The digital platform (www.gramamukhya.in) created under this project aims to enable elected women leaders of *panchayats* to build a community and allows them to exchange information, share opinions and ideas, debate on common issues of concern, etc. It is accordingly named *Gramamukhya*, literally meaning ‘local level leaders’. It is a collaborative portal intended not only for matters of direct governance but also for sharing concerns pertaining to its women user’s wider social, political and cultural life. The platform has been developed in the local language (Malayalam) and English text has been deliberately avoided.

The content on the digital platform has been categorised according to three main sections or modules. Of the main features outlined below, the ‘Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing’ (*Arividam*) of the platform deals with governance while the ‘Discussion Forum’ (*Charchavedi*) and ‘Writer’s Blog’ (*Ezhuthidam*) are associated with wider public life and are mutually reinforcing. This is visible in the main page of the website as seen in this screen shot in the figure below:



The feature related to local governance is knowledge networking through the creation of a ‘Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing’ module. Even though government rules and regulations are available online in the local language, these need to be paraphrased into documents that can easily be read and comprehended by all. One of the ambitions of the Project had been to facilitate the emergent digital community of women leaders to revise and develop these documents to be used eventually to inform policy making of the local self government department in Kerala. The Support Group is expected to respond to doubts

placed by members and to share their own experiences in similar situations of decision making dilemmas and difficulties. This will be evident in the Workshop Annexure II(4) and also in the Findings section of this Report.

The ‘Discussion Forum’ is to generate discussion on matters related to social and political issues of contemporary relevance and this we envision will eventually enable them to critically evaluate their own positioning within local governance structures and question their current role as mere development managers. The efforts towards engendering governance, we believe, must come from collective discussions and sharing over such wider issues. That this process has already commenced during the short span of this project duration, is amply evident from the posts in the website.

The platform also provides, through a Writer’s Blog, opportunities for critical engagement with feminist literature in the regional language, mediated by identified writers under the Project. Women leaders have, it is encouraging to see, posted their comments on this blog and some have even shown a willingness to start their own individual blogs and reflect on a personal level, under anonymity. This will be particularly valuable once their official term is over and provide a channel for their continued engagement in public life.

Findings and discussions

This is a project of building political solidarity across differences, forming an ‘invented space’ for elected women representatives from different political parties, collaborating with feminist activists, institutions, academics and writers in Kerala, and the appropriation of ICTs in the course of building a communication community. The findings of this project are therefore in the nature of reflections on the unfolding of this process rather than being completed results. Our outcomes are still in-the-making and must necessarily go beyond the duration of the present project which has effectively been ten months (January 2011-October 2011). They pertain to the process of developing the digital platform *Gramamukhya*, and to the creation of enabling conditions for its effective use as an ‘invented space’ for women *panchayat* leaders in the three selected districts.

A) Challenges towards building a politics of solidarity

The task of overcoming the prevalent developmentalist discourse in which women leaders see themselves as passive recipients of diverse varieties of training was not an easy one. Changing mindsets crystallised over decades of developmental interventions guided by national and international agendas of empowerment has meant numerous rounds of discussions and deliberations to arrive at the need for a women’s collective. The challenge therefore was in building a politics of feminist solidarity in a context where feminist mobilisation is not only absent but also caught up in the gendering governance efforts in Kerala.

We were clear that we would not use the support of any existing platform such as KILA or any party which we believe is antithetical to feminist mobilisation as taking any help from local powers would disrupt the exercise of building solidarity among women leaders. Instead our approach was to contact them over phone individually by directly introducing ourselves and the project. In order to ensure their participation we strategised to organise initial rounds of workshops at venues in close proximity to their official gatherings. Upon attending the first workshop directly after one such district level meeting at the collector’s office, some presidents actually expressed to us the irony of discussing disbursement and expenditure of drought relief funds during the rainy season. We placed *Gramamukhya* as a forum to raise these and other issues and to individually and collectively register their dissent.

Nevertheless organising workshops was not easy. They had to be rescheduled often on account of their conflicting schedules and priorities towards official commitments including the state elections held in April 2011. Workshops were cancelled at the last minute because the women presidents had themselves been given very short notice to attend to official duties, as governmental intimations are now increasingly being carried out over the Internet. Being quiescent and duty-bound to the rules of office further exacerbated their inability to prioritise for themselves.

Networking with the women *panchayat* presidents from the three districts selected took nearly 3-4 months in which we were finally able to share our views through a round table format to convince them of the need for them to effectively utilise the opportunity provided to them through 50% reservation of seats for women. Our task was further compounded by the need to build solidarity across differences. Women leaders from different districts had varied party affiliations and were often bound to consult with their party leaders and gain their consent to participate in this endeavour. It was particularly difficult in Kannur where party politics permeates every aspect of life and is often witness to violent conflicts between opposing parties.

During workshops, discussion veered to the collective sharing of experiences of exercise of power by bureaucracy and political higher-ups and discussing the reasons for the same. We had lengthy discussions on the notion of invited and invented spaces for women's empowerment using examples from everyday life experiences and in particular learning how former presidents effectively resisted and negotiated with situations of the exertion of patriarchal power. Examples of incidents where such narratives were shared, are provided in Annexure II (4) and one such case is reproduced here below:

Former president and member of the support group

I was elected as the first dalit president of the panchayat in 2005. Of the 27000 panchayat population, 25% consists of dalits. In two places in my panchayat, legal sand mining was being carried out with the consent of the panchayat. However, illegal mining was prevalent in other locations. In spite of repeated interventions of panchayat officials, illegal activities continued day and night. People started accusing the panchayat for their indifference. I made an enquiry from which I learnt that the police were in fact supporting the sand Mafia.

One day while I was returning after conducting an investigation from the site in the official vehicle, I came across a lorry carrying sand and ordered it to be stopped. I informed the

police and asked them to come and take charge of the matter. They gave me a cold response saying that there was no vehicle available to come. Instead they asked me to bring the lorry to the police station. So I asked the lorry driver to move the lorry to the police station. Instead of conceding to my request, the driver rammed the lorry onto the panchayat jeep. Around 100 people gathered around me, used abusive language and insulted me. But I withstood the pressure of the crowd. By using my official position as the panchayat president, I demanded that the police to take strong action. Local newspapers and other media highlighted my efforts and thus the police were forced to take action against the sand Mafia. Thus illegal sand mining came to a halt for a while. Though many people still pressurise me to withdraw the case, I continue to fight the case even after the completion of my term as the panchayat president.

The creation of a support group of nine former presidents, three from each district, has been guided by the conviction that they would be able to not only share their experience with serving presidents but also mediate between the project team and the women leaders to some extent. The role of the support group in this project for that reason is a significant even for its future sustainability. Although many presidents had individually felt the need to get connected with other presidents, particularly in times of crisis for exchanging doubts and seeking solutions, interpreting official documents etc., the need for forming a collective to address such issues was absent. We believe we have initiated this process which is still ongoing as women leaders gradually pave the way for active deliberations together, both online and offline.

We also made efforts to vertically align women-centric meso-level organisations, feminist activists and academics and writers for an alternative gender politics. J. Devika, feminist scholar from CDS has been taking a lead in content generation and writers such as Anitha Thampi, V. M. Girija and K.R. Meera have been consulted and have expressed their interest in supporting the platform. Our collaboration with Kerala Mahila Samakhya initially began in conducting Workshops in Thiruvanthapuram and Malappuram, but later did not materialise as envisioned, and we had to handle the workshops without their support. This calls for a collective reflection in order to work across differences if any and to continue the journey with women in local governance together.

B) Expression of solidarity and reflection on our positioning

It has also been vital for us to articulate our own positions within this effort. This has meant the expression of solidarity in the creation of the invented space of *Gramamukhya*

and in working on this project. It has given us an opportunity to be self- reflexive and paved the way for critical engagement and even empowerment within our own spheres of action. Our formal positioning within IIT Madras, primarily a science and technology institution, and within it, in the Department of Social Sciences is significant in this regard. It is a placement that, at one level enabled us to discuss the technology question in a language and perspective different from that of dominant one within the institution but, at another level, also prevented us from collaborating with them for the development of the digital platform for that very reason. Questioning ICT for development projects' approach to technology 'diffusion', 'adoption' and 'adaptation' has been possible precisely because one of us has had experience in working with engineers on projects involving innovative ICT applications in rural contexts. The space of reflection provided by *Gramamukhya* has indeed been an opportunity to rethink ICT applications from the feminist perspective of their appropriation.

Working on this project has meant negotiating time (nearly 3-4 days every month) away from our teaching duties at the department. The experience and learning from this project, however, now informs the Gender and Technology course we plan to jointly offer. Interestingly, the project has also posed new administrative challenges. Appointing women *panchayat* presidents as experts or consultants with minimal formal educational attainments but rich experience on the ground posed a challenge to the framework of recruitment based on qualification at IITM and required numerous rounds of justifications before funds could be disbursed. Finally, it is with jubilation that we announce that regardless of how we discuss the question of technology we can nevertheless legitimately claim our right to server space for the *Gramamukhya* platform at IITM.

In hindsight, for us, this project has been a conversation between a *marginalised minority* - us women researchers (doubly marginalised both as women *and* social scientists in a technology institute) together with a *marginalised majority* - of women leaders (more than 50%) in local governance! We hope this alliance is the beginning of each of us claiming for ourselves legitimate spaces of self-expression within our respective spheres.

C) *Gramamukhya* as a space for discussion and expression

Despite the general access to, and acceptance of ICTs in Kerala, the particularities of localities, the differences within, primarily of age and levels of income and education etc. do in fact lead to differential levels of ICT acceptance and use. Workshop sessions revealed that many of the younger women leaders already had a background in the use of computers

and Internet. They were also enthusiastic and quick to learn. It was possible therefore for them to support others in the use of ICTs and proved effective in building confidence, for other women learning to use the computers. As part of our strategy, already discussed in the methodology section, we encouraged women to access and use existing facilities both at home and in the *panchayat* office. Understanding the gender politics of technology use and appropriation as well as experiences of former presidents made them gradually realise the importance of being equipped with ICTs regardless of the difficulties surrounding the same. Now all members of the Support Group and many of the presidents are enrolled in their local *Akshaya* centres to hone their basic skills in ICTs. One of the women presidents shares below her satisfaction at her new found facility in using the Internet in her work life:

“Govt. was issuing ID cards to presidents (of panchayats) and there was a doubt in some of the details I had submitted for the same. Since I had recently acquired a mail ID after joining *Gramamukhya*, I was quickly able to correct the details on the card and send them back to the Govt. immediately and felt very good about it.”

Having removed the feature of FAQs in the website, the user-interface design of the portal focuses on *Gramamukhya* members initiating discussions on governance in the Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing module. A sample translation and gist of such a discussion that has led to some new areas of consideration are reproduced below and is demonstrative of the kind of collective reflection taking place on *Gramamukhya* with regard to the drawbacks of the existing planning process in Kerala.

President A: “Where can we get information on the total funds available before initiating the planning process?”

Support Group Member: “This information is available in Annexure IV of the state budget document.”

President B: “But this sounds like a typical official response as only information on plan funds and state outlay is available and there are a range of other funds from state and centrally sponsored schemes which we will come to know only just before the implementation also leaves us with not enough time for planning these other funds nor in integrating them with the plan funds. Proper integration of plan funds with the available funds hence is not possible which basically defeats the whole purpose of local level integrated planning”.

A sample post below in the Knowledge Creation and Information module pertains to suggestions of providing laptops to women presidents.

“There is a provision for each *panchayat* office to have in total of eight computers. Can we collectively request the state government to approve that one of these be provided as a laptop to the presidents due to the fact that they are constantly required to travel?”

D) Gramamukhya: Content generation

The website design, and its eventual appropriation by women leaders, has largely rested on its content, which in turn has been facilitated through the project’s association with feminist scholars and writers. Apart from building awareness and encouraging discussions on issues of local governance and politics in Kerala from a feminist standpoint, the project has been able to generate interest in feminist literature among women leaders and some have even expressed an interest in writing themselves. Here it must be noted that while many were happy to share their identity online, others preferred to remain anonymous. We are now working on the user interface of the digital platform to take into account this feature as well. We have been able to select and source content for the website and a snapshot of these are available in Annexure II(6) and are in the process of being placed in the website as well. Women leaders are being encouraged to read these articles and biographies of successful women in the public domain and the introduction of a recent feature in Version 2.0 of the website further enhances its usability as will be evident from Annexure II(5) on the same.

E) Interim assessment of Gramamukhya: Some reflections

In the final month of the project, a questionnaire was administered among the women *panchayat* presidents and members of the Support Group to gain an insight on the way forward. Even though their online engagement with the *Gramamukhya* platform can be effectively reviewed through content analysis, given that many women leaders are still in the process of learning to use computers and the Internet, a questionnaire was employed to collect information on some aspects of their background, extent of engagement in the website, and their views pertaining to the same.

i. Technical competency

Of total the total 126 women leaders enrolled, 94% of them are married and around 40% have completed their matriculation (Class 10 or less), whereas another 40% have either completed graduation or post-graduation or have diplomas or professional degrees. Around 11% of them are below the age of 30, 65% are in the age group 30-50 and 23% belong to

the age group of 50- 60 years. This difference in the levels of education and age is also reflected in their ability to master computer and Internet use during technical sessions.

ii. Factors determining entry into local government

Around 50% of the women leaders are new entrants in local governance. Upon probing their social and political engagement prior to this office, 14% reported that they were active in student politics and 10% in party politics. 25% of them have been involved in *Kudumbashree* activities and another 40% did not have any such prior engagements. 24% believe that they were selected as candidates by their political parties on account of their performance as elected representatives in the previous term and 30% believe that despite their personal skills and other engagements, their chance of getting candidature was singularly attributed to the quotas reserved for women, but did not reflect upon their suitability compared to other women contenders for office. Another 20% believe that in addition to the reservations, their engagements with *Kudumbashree* and other similar organisations may have helped them in getting elected.

iii. Access and use of computer and Internet

Along with other domestic consumer items (mixer grinder, fridge and washing machine) and motor vehicles, around 60% listed the computer and Internet as their first choice of technological artefacts to possess. It indicates their priority in accessing and sharing information. Nearly 30% have computers at home but only 18% use the same. Only about 30% of them access the computer and Internet from their offices and another 10% depend on local *Akshaya* centres implying that nearly 40% of women presidents do not have access and have not used computers and Internet prior to this project. Interestingly, around 30% who belong to the younger age group opined that regular access to computer and Internet is a basic requirement whereas 50%, who are elder women, are of the opinion that one should learn how to use it but that it was not essential.

About 10% of the presidents have been using the computer and Internet for more than one year and nearly 45% have started using it only during the last one year, which falls within the period of this project pointing to the fact that the workshops must have had an impact on the increase in use in addition to other factors. Upon eliciting the browsing pattern of those who use them, half of them use it to search government and related websites, another 20% browse for accessing their emails and additional 20% access other websites. This indicates the fact that local governance system is changing in terms of its use of Internet-based information sharing and communication. Women leaders are now required to access latest circulars and related information, from the Local Self Government Department's

website. Also all the *panchayat* presidents are given photo ID cards. A majority of them cited the lack of experience and training as a difficulty in using computers and the Internet and few of them also mentioned technical hitches such as slow speed of Internet and lack of connectivity.

F) Evaluation of *Gramamukhya*

Even though nearly 70% of women presidents opined that the *Gramamukhya* collective and digital platform is relevant and useful for them, only around 40% open and read the *Gramamukhya* website, indicating the need to focus on the remaining members in the coming months. With regard to the topics to be discussed in the forum, they find issues and topics related to local governance most pressing. Around 40% of them also expressed their interest and willingness in engaging with discussions, by creating their own posts.

In response to a question on information gaps encountered in their daily life and the necessary support to handle the same, 35% of them felt that legal and ICT-related information and skill development as the most important ones, whereas another 30% felt the lack of information with regard to governance as one of the most important gaps. The *Gramamukhya* digital platform is precisely addressing the first two information gaps but the legal aspect is still missing. In response to this need, necessary information regarding legal provisions and rights will have to be uploaded in the platform soon. Also around 8% felt that the support from local bureaucracy is important in their daily functioning.

With regard to their future plans, 40% expressed an interest in continuing local governance and another 20% would like to have a presence in the public domain. Yet another 25% kept silent, indicating either their indecision, or unwillingness to express their decision. Very few have set their ambitions to secure a place in higher politics.

G) Overall reflections from the data

On the whole, this data indicates that age and educational differences are important in addressing differentials in technical skill levels and indicative of the fact that all members may not use the digital platform. Hence, targeting all presidents may not be feasible and instead, a critical mass of users of *Gramamukhya* needs to emerge, who can then take the lead in coordinating their online activism in influencing their offline contexts where the remaining women presidents are involved.

The project needs to still address the issue of information and knowledge gaps identified by the presidents. In particular, their request for biographies of women leaders from Kerala, both in workshops and in the descriptive section of the survey, is an immediate task. Finally, greater in-depth engagement and analysis of the website's content, greater use by our feminist collaborators and interactions with presidents in the online context, will help shape future directions collectively in the coming months.

Overall conclusions and reflections

This project has been an ambitious one, not only in its concept and design but also in its expectation of outcomes. As already suggested, the *Gramamukhya* website is a community-in-the-making and it has not been our intention to create it as a finished product within the duration of the project. It is for this reason that we are now concerned about the project's future direction. The project's aim of building a digital community, or what we have called a communication community, is within the wider goal of political empowerment of women leaders in Kerala's local governance, leading to a gradual personal transformation and the exercise of agency in multiple arenas, primarily through vertical integration with individuals and groups who share this kind of politics.

Merely developing and handing over the website as a completed outcome would defeat our original purpose of feminist appropriation of technology. Instead it requires a continuous engagement not only at the horizontal level across *panchayats* but also vertically, with feminist writers, scholars and activists engaged in the field. We therefore believe that questions of who owns and maintains the site are important as transferring the same to state institutions would only obscure its original intention as an 'invented space' of feminist articulation. Given that members of *Gramamukhya* are still in the process of actively engaging with it as a platform of discussion, and that activism is a way far ahead, it is imperative to look at the continuity of this project till such time that the platform becomes more and more active. It is therefore necessary to find financial resources beyond the current project period.

Working on this project has crystallised our research interests in the broad area of gender and technology. We are well aware of the fact that this digital platform may have consequences as yet unanticipated within this project. However, we believe that prolonged engagement with the emergent digital community will provide us valuable insights into the process of building virtual communities as well as in the practice of citizenship in the information society. In the coming year we are exploring the following research ideas.

We hope that *Gramamukhya*, as it unfolds over the coming months, will provide insights into the politics of solidarity-building across differences, within the trans-local digital space. It remains to be seen how ICT-mediated communities-in-the-making can politicise women in governance and enable them to claim their citizenship rights and a position in the public domain.

By taking on this project and approaching it from the standpoint of the feminist appropriation of technology-in-use, we are engaging in what Wajcman (2000) has called getting into the “black box” of ICT design and use, together with its related forms of exclusion and resistance. It would be interesting to examine some of the communication practices and modes employed by members of *Gramamukhya* while sharing of their experiences, concerns and knowledge not only pertaining to governance processes, but also to wider public life. Also, focusing on transactions between online and offline contexts would provide insights and indeed even generate questions on cyber activism in general.

Some questions that have emerged are:

- o The process of building solidarity across differences through exchanges and negotiations is one of immense possibilities but also that of limitations. How does it eventually play out amidst existing hierarchical arrangements as well as newly emergent ones?
- o How do shared meanings of collective politics, agency, resistance and social action evolve among the group of women using the digital platform www.gramamukhya.in?
- o Does this platform, originally designed to facilitate local governance knowledge exchange, have the potential to eventually lead women to come together and build opinion on contemporary socio-political issues and engage with feminist literature and thereby lead to their transformation? What are the limiting blocks if any in this process?
- o And finally, does *Gramamukhya* reflect the feminist critique of top-down narratives of ICTs for development as an invented space for the building of a dialogic communication community?

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Annexures

(1-8) List

This includes the following documents in the following pages.

Annexure I Map of Kerala state showing districts with list of *panchayats* in each project district

Annexure II Major Project milestones and workshops

Annexure III Descriptive overview of and narratives from workshops conducted

Annexure IV Selected posts of experiences shared by the support group

Annexure V Design process of *Gramamukhya* from Version 1 to Version 2

Annexure VI Content generation plan for *Gramamukhya*

Annexure I Map and list of *panchayats* in the three project districts



Annexure II: Major project milestones and workshops

S.No.	Date (dd/mm/yy)	Milestone/Workshop Description
1.	25/11/10	Funds received by IC&SR, Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
2.	12/10	Project appointments initiated including the appointment of the technical team.
3.	16/2/11	Logo design and commencement of website development
4.	02/11	Identification of districts and women <i>panchayat</i> leaders
5.	03/11	Mobilisation of the support group initiated
6.	04/11	Completion of SOA
7.	13/4/11	Discussions held at Kerala <i>Mahila Samakhya</i> Society (KMSS) office at Thiruvananthapuram for possible collaboration
8.	19/4/11	One-day hands-on training workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at Dinesh IT Park, Kannur
9.	27/4/11	Participation in Delhi seminar
10.	30/4/11	Second meeting for collaboration with KMSS held in their office at Thiruvananthapuram
		Half-a-day training programme held at C-DIT Regional Centre,

11.	14/6/11	Kannur for <i>panchayat</i> presidents
12.	14/6/11	Half-a-day training programme held at <i>Akshaya</i> Centre in Thalipparamba town for <i>panchayat</i> presidents
13.	15/6/11	Half-a-day training programme held at <i>Akshaya</i> Centre at Irrity in Phalcon Plaza complex
14.	15/6/11	Half-a-day training programme held at Thalassery
15.	18/6/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayath</i> presidents held at Cotton Hill School Thiruvananthapuram
16.	19/6/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at Rajas High School Kottakal , Malappuram
17.	29/7/11	One-day workshop for the support group at Kesari Smaraka Mandiram, Thiruvananthapuram.
18.	30/7/11	Meeting at CDS for content development
19.	19/8/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at Adhyapakabhavan Thiruvananthapuram
20.	20/8/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at Prasanth Hotel Malappuram
21.	15/9/11	Training for support group members at Thiruvananthapuram
22.	29/9/11 to 1/10/11	Binitha V. Thampi and J. Devika from the CITIGEN network attended the 2011 Women in Politics conference that was held in Dili, East Timor between 29 September – 1 October. Titled 'Amplifying the Voices of Women in Politics: The Second Asia-Pacific Conference on Women in Politics and Governance', the conference provided an opportunity for feminists from the region to collaboratively ideate on the issues and challenges that women's participation in politics has thrown up.

23.	13/10/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at C-DIT Course Centre Thiruvananthapuram
24.	14/10/11	Report of the training for support group members at Kannur
25.	15/10/11	Report of the training for support group members at Malappuram
26.	29/10/11	Workshop for women <i>panchayat</i> presidents held at Dinesh IT Park, Kannur
27.	22/11/11	Completion of final report
28.	12/11	Final workshop under this project
29.	31/12/11	Website revision
30.	02/12	Website revision, support group activities & content uploading continues

Annexure III: Descriptive overview of & narratives from workshops conducted

The workshops conducted as a part of this project can be categorised under three broad headings – those conducted for orienting participants to the need for formation of a collective of women leaders; introduction to the politics of technology use along with enabling computer and Internet usage, and mobilisation and orientation of the support group members consisting of nine former presidents. They were conducted in select venues in all three districts. This section gives a descriptive overview and narratives from the same.

I Workshops on orientation to the need for the formation of collective of women in LSGs

The aim of the first round of workshops was to orient women *panchayat* presidents to the idea and potential of a collective of their own through which they can share and communicate a wide range of ideas and issues pertaining to local governance. The final goal of this first round of workshops was to share our idea of forming a community that is conscious of its collective and individual positioning while acknowledging their internal socio-cultural and political differences, including political party affiliations.

Narratives

On the *need* for a collective for women leaders:

We stressed on the fact that despite a large percentage of seats reserved under the quota system for women, women were yet to exert any real authority.

“At present, more women are in power than the stipulated 50% reservation for women. In a democratic system, we find that the majority has the ability to collectively decide its politics and transform matters. But is this true in the case of the majority of women panchayat presidents? The answer is a no. Especially in the case of the present leadership, many of our presidents are new to the political arena. In this context, even if we increase the reserved quota further, we doubt whether it will serve any purpose and whether women will actually be decision makers. Also you may have often felt the need to interact, discuss and share ideas and thoughts with presidents from other panchayats, who may be in a similar situation as you are. It is for this reason it is important to build a collective.”

On the significance of building an ICT-mediated trans-local network:

“Another main question is regarding the nature of the network. Many of you panchayat presidents are busy, with very little time to spare. You need to travel often for matters related to panchayats. You are not able to find time to meet or congregate to share issues with other panchayats leaders and learn from the experience of other panchayats. Therefore, creating a collective or network of women panchayat presidents which enable you to communicate with each other using computers and the Internet is important especially since this is already there in the panchayat office and being used by the staff. This will also help you in scheduling face-to-face meetings with one another at a later date.”

On having access to documents pertaining to local governance and the possibility of discussing them together on a digital platform:

“We know that the circulars and orders of the Local Self Government Department are available through the Internet. Therefore many panchayat presidents have started using the Internet. However, many are yet to be equipped to use them. But it is important for presidents to know all matters related to panchayat administration if they want to go ahead in their leadership. They will have to seek help from others if they are not aware of these elements. There will be vice-presidents party members, secretary or other panchayat officials who know these aspects. Thus you will be forced to spend a lot of time and consult each of them before taking a decision which will foster dependency and also alter relations of power. There will be a lot of problems when you don't get the right information on time. However, if you have the right information you will be able to resist many political manipulations. If you want to say ‘let me think and decide’, then you must have the relevant information. New presidents find this difficult and often take their entire five-year term to get over this crisis.”

On the Women Component Plan and its utilisation for themselves:

“We have mentioned about the politics of the majority within a democracy. The Women Component Plan was implemented for many years. But there is no clarity about women's projects as there is no specific state policy on it. Why is it so? We could not develop a politics around the Women's Component Plan. We never thought of our needs collectively. We need to nurture such a collective politics within the governance system. There should be an effort from our side to understand it. Nobody will give it to you. At the most the Government will tell you that you can take 10% of total allocated funds. But because of the

lack of a gender politics, we will be left out if we do not prioritise our needs and demands.”

On the need for collective articulation of needs and exercise citizenship rights:

“In the past, though there were several government programmes for farmers, they were not effectively utilised. In the wake of agrarian crisis and the focussed coordination of LSGs in providing benefits to them, the scenario changed. They held discussions during panchayat board meetings, highlighted their problems and demanded more money than what is allotted for them. There are cases where the farmers demanded the panchayat authorities to distribute the funds of NREGA to them. They came together and put forward a politics that upheld their necessities and demands as an interest group. Reservation alone cannot bring about such a change unless and until you put forward your political clout. This is something we need to do if we are to leverage the gains offered by reservations. Our Gramamukhya is a thought and effort to make this possible. We are talking about a women’s politics. We are people with many differences such different political parties, varied family backgrounds, age differences etc. What can be done to create a feminist politics amidst this diversity? ”

An introduction to use of computers and the Internet was made in order to apprise the women of the value of technology to achieve the above mentioned goals for formation of a women’s collective using the *Gramamukhya* digital platform.

Towards the end of these workshops, there was much enthusiasm for the project and its goals and many leaders expressed their interest to build the collective. In the group discussions, some participants identified materials to be uploaded on the website that not only included some governance-related documents but also biographies of contemporary women leaders and model public speeches that would help them empower themselves. Many women in fact were impatient with their PC training process and eager to share their experiences in governance with others and did not want to wait to learn to use a computer. A group of such women volunteered to initiate discussions on paper which our field Project Associate digitised and uploaded on to the website on their behalf.

II Computer access and usage: second round of workshops

At the end of the first round of meetings with the women leaders we realised that even though many had access to computers and the Internet in their offices and homes they were either not confident to use them – they had a mental block toward its use - or were not

expected to do so given that it belonged either to the office staff for discharging their duties or to male members in their homes. Many expressed a kind of techno-phobia towards the use of the PC. Discussions in the workshops often revolved around the fear of technology and also the challenges that women faced when women first began to use the pressure cooker and the mixer-grinder which have now become integral parts of every home. Learning from the experience of technology at home, it was decided that women needed more time to handle the technology in order to begin to feel comfortable using it for their own purposes.

We therefore decided to launch a series of workshops that not only familiarised them with computers but provided them with hands-on use of the computer at ICT centres organised in their districts. The focus of these workshops was to familiarise them with nuances of computer usage – from basic switching on/off the machine, opening a Gmail account, sending and receiving emails, opening a Word document, to a glimpse into the myriad possibilities for self-expression that technology could provide. Many needed help in familiarising themselves with Malayalam transliteration software that enables one to write in Malayalam using the English keyboard. Each participant was given individualised attention through a one or two participants per machine format. Despite poor connectivity and repeated loss of the Internet there was an overall satisfaction and indeed, a further thirst for learning.

By the end of this round of workshops all the women leaders had been registered on the *Gramamukhya* website. They were given a demonstration on the use of browsers, the process of searching for a website on the Internet and on how to find the *Gramamukhya* website. They had begun to learn to navigate the website and its three major sub-sections, *Arividam*, *Ezhuthidam* and *Charchavedi*. The facilitators helped them navigate through each section and view a brief introduction to articles as well as the completed articles. They were shown how to enter the website using their user name and password and get familiarised with the privileges of being a member of *Gramamukhya*. They learned how to use the chat facility to communicate with other members. Some women leaders expressed their desire to be *anonymous* in their posts, reflecting their hesitation in getting identified while raising certain sensitive issues and concerns.

III Orientation of support group workshop

Having mobilised the support group consisting of nine former presidents from each of the three districts, a workshop to orient them to *Gramamukhya* was conducted in

Thiruvanthapuram. Since each of them understood *panchayat* administration and its difficulties in their earlier capacity as presidents and had succeeded in overcoming the same, it was important to bring them together to share their experiences on *Gramamukhya* platform for new entrants and to take a lead in building the collective. Some of the narratives from this gathering are reproduced below:

On the rationale of forming the support group and their role:

“You all belong to that small group of former presidents who have had rich experience in grappling with both panchayat administration and party-higher ups against all odds and have been successful within it. Reservation is not only an opportunity to assume the post of the panchayat president, but it is also an opportunity to get into the political realm. Many of you have efficiently utilised your opportunity, but a large group has not succeeded. Another group is wondering what they will do once they finish the five-year term. So we need to think of how we can use the given opportunity to sustain our involvement within the public domain collectively and Gramamukhya is an effort in this direction.”

On their role in coming together to mentor new entrants and building a collective of women leaders via *Gramamukhya*:

“At first this must be shaped amongst you and then shared among the serving presidents to build Gramamukhya as a women’s collective. We, members of the project team, are outsiders. We can only give our opinion on certain things and discuss. Creating and shaping the politics will have to be done by you, the former presidents, by sharing your past experiences with the present presidents. The onus is on you. There is no facility to communicate the difficulties of the presidents to the top brass of the LSGD. They make policies and issue orders. We are discussing these concerns with a hope that by creating a woman’s politics, we can transform local governments in the near future.”

On deciphering government orders for themselves:

“As you know well, government orders can frighten us initially. They are written in a very unfriendly official language. But if we rewrite it in a language that can be understood by women and make it available on a website, it will be useful. You will be relieved as you will know the procedures for each aspect of panchayat administration. Those who have completed five years term in panchayats can easily understand this language and have no fear of it. You still remember the government orders during your period of office. If you share those experiences and knowledge, the newcomers will be relieved and benefit from it.

If you discuss this aspect and prepare a revised document free from the complexities of the language of the government, it can be uploaded on the Gramamukhya website and it can potentially change the practice of preparing such documents by LSGD authorities in the future.”

On the need for horizontal communication for sharing initially and during times of crises:

“Initially women enter into the political field with lot of enthusiasm. But soon they find it both perplexing and challenging. They may need to approach older members of their office like a senior vice president or an experienced secretary to get their queries clarified but they are likely to be inhibited to approach them or even if they do so, it may alter the balance of power in the relationship. Contacting another woman president from the nearby panchayat is therefore a good option. Gramamukhya is hopefully a space that will address this issue.”

On the types of content needed to help build their confidence in governance matters:

“Often women feel under-confident before their male counterparts. Yet there are instances of women leaders like Mrs. Meenakshi Thampan, Ex.MLA; and Mrs. Saradhamuraleedhran IAS, Director Kudumbashree projects; who have been successful in their respective fields. Listening to their speeches and style of public speaking through short videos would be helpful for new entrants who aspire to develop such public skills.”

On the potential of the computer and the Internet for dissemination of information:

“In the present scenario we need not necessarily accept information without questioning it and we are also in a position to generate information. The main change brought out by information technology is that it has democratised access to information. We must also occupy this space. It is a great thing to interact with the new technology of the present day as women. We must be able to speak out, write down and seek knowledge with the aid of the new technology. During the last assembly election, many contestants used blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook. They sent out friend requests as part of their political campaign. It shows the need to intervene in all such spaces. Through the Internet, we can create a common document; have it redrafted by several people working on it at the same time. You can express your opinion as panchayat presidents and create knowledge with the aid of the new technology. We may challenge the present style of governance also.”

Annexure IV: Select posts by Gramamukhya's support group members

Experiences shared by former presidents

The following has been translated from Malayalam and paraphrased for the benefit of the readers of this report.

Support group member A

This post refers to a former president's intervention in the postal department in her region. Old age pension is usually disbursed through the local post office. This ex-president received a complaint over irregularities in the disbursement of the old age pension belonging to a deceased Dalit woman. An enquiry revealed that even after two years of her death, her pension was regularly disbursed. It also disclosed that the local post man had embezzled her pension. When the malpractice was exposed, instead of targeting the culprit, people started demanding the resignation of the *panchayat* clerk responsible for the disbursement of old age pension. When the ex-president contacted the postal department, they asked her to give a written complaint as the *panchayat* president. The matter was discussed in the *panchayat* governing board. But instead of supporting the cause, the *panchayat* members, including the president's own party members, put pressure on her to drop the case against the postman. But she stood firm and gave a written complaint. In six months time, the post man was suspended.

Support group member B

During August 2008, this former president was on an official tour to a village. She was travelling by a Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus. Since the bus was full of passengers, she had to stand and travel. When she found that a man was occupying a seat reserved for women, she demanded that he vacate the seat. He did not concede to her demand. Instead he started using abusive language. She contacted Deputy Superintendent of Police (DYSP) over the phone and asked for police intervention in the matter. The man overheard this conversation and vacated the seat. As they reached a nearby town, the police came to the bus stand and escorted the accused and her to the police control room and questioned them. She explained the details. She was then asked to proceed to the police station to lodge the complaint. Since it was getting late in the night, she decided not to go ahead with the procedures. Therefore the police authorities released the accused after warning him sufficiently. The president was taken to her native place in a police jeep with a women police escort. A news report on the incident came out in the

leading newspaper Malayala Manorama and she was congratulated by many for her courage and her right decision to take action.

Support group member C

This former president was elected as the first Dalit president of a *panchayat* in 2005. Of the 27000-strong *panchayat* population, 25% were Dalits. In two places, legal sand mining was being carried out with the consent of the *panchayat*. However, illegal sand mining was also prevalent at the same time. . Despite of repeated interventions of *panchayat* officials, illegal activities persisted. People started accusing the *panchayat* for their indifference. Thus this ex-president launched an enquiry, from which she learnt that the police were in fact abetting the sand mafia.

One day while she was returning after conducting an investigation from the site in the official vehicle, she came across a lorry carrying sand and ordered it to be stopped. She informed the police and asked them to come and take charge of the matter. They gave her a cold response saying that there was no vehicle available to come. Instead they asked her to bring the lorry to the police station. So she asked the lorry driver to move the lorry to the police station. Instead of conceding to her request, the driver hit the lorry onto the *panchayat* jeep. Around 100 people gathered around her, used abusive language and insulted her. But she withstood the pressure exerted by the crowd. By using her official position as a *panchayat* president, she demanded the police to take strong action. Local newspapers and other media highlighted her efforts and thus the police were forced to take action against the sand mafia. Thus illegal sand mining came to a halt for a while. Though many people continue to pressurise her to withdraw the case, she still fights the case even after the completion of her term as the *panchayat* president.

Support group member D

In the *panchayat* of this former president, sand mining from the river is permitted in three places. Though the permit for mining was issued by the *panchayat*, actual mining process was regulated by mine workers. The *panchayat* population started accusing the president for the lack of control on the sand mining workers who were illegally mining natural resources of the *panchayat*. Some of them accused her for taking bribes from the sand mafia. The actual price of one load of sand was Rs. 3300/- and the lorry rent was Rs. 1000/-. But sand mafia used to extract Rs. 10,000/- for one load of sand.

Therefore the *panchayat* decided to intervene and make sand available to the customers at a fair price. This irritated the sand mafia. They started threatening this ex-president. One day they came to her room, and started using abusive language against her. The chairman asked them to mind their language and behave properly, but they didn't concede. Then she asked the police to intervene in the case. Though the police force came in a jeep, they didn't take any supportive stand. The Sub-Inspector did not question the sand mafia. So she went to the Circle Inspector and got his support to force the Sub Inspector to act on the issue.

The next day she issued a permit for *panchayat* residents, including women, to purchase sand from the disputed site. But the sand mafia didn't succumb to her orders. The people came back demanding reimbursement of the permit price. She immediately requested the Tahasildhar, Village Officer and Circle Inspector to come to the site. The officials and the police came, but the sand workers refused to cooperate. She then took a firm stand, asking the officials to close the site till the sand workers acceded to till the demands of the *panchayat*. Immediately the sand workers came for reconciliation fearing job loss and within half an hour they sold 11 loads of sand. The issue was settled. Even today it is the *panchayat* that has control over the site.

Support group member E

The four wards belonging to this former president's *panchayat* were included in the scheme area identified by central government for agricultural purpose and for building a golf course. Therefore the *panchayat* was not permitted to sanction building of houses in these areas. But at the same time, those who had money used their resources to get special sanction and managed to build houses by bribing officials. The *panchayat* secretary and department officials were also involved in this unscrupulous activity. After becoming the *panchayat* President, she studied the issue and presented it in the *panchayat* board meeting. But few members resisted her intentions. She decided to go ahead in spite of the resistance from within. She approached the LSGD Minister and submitted a memorandum. She got a reply from the minister informing her that since the order was issued by the central government, they could not go against it. The *panchayat* officials made fun of her for taking up the issue. She lobbied with the local MLA and raised questions in the legislative assembly. At that time the Central Minister for *Panchayat Raj* Department visited the *panchyat* and she used the opportunity to submit a memorandum to him in this regard. Towards the end of 2008, the government issued an order permitting people having 2-3

cents of land to build houses. The order also permitted them to get permanent numbers. Though the order reached the *panchayat*, the officials concealed it from her as they were extracting money from people for issuing temporary registration numbers. When she met the LSGD minister next time, she came to know about the order and she informed people about it. The people of the *panchayat* congratulated her for her successful intervention.

Support group member F

This is about illegal sand mining at a famous lake in Kerala which provides drinking water to many *panchayats* in Trivandrum district. When this former president noticed attempts of sand mafia and private firms to fill this lake, she convened an all-party meeting to discuss the matter. The local people protested against all attempts to fill the lake. The sand mafia also showed their restlessness by protesting during the meeting. They asked her to take money and spare them. They also threatened to kill her if she did not cooperate with them. She stood firmly and met Inspector General of Police (IG) and convinced him and enlisted his support. The police intervened, arrested three people from the sand mafia and captured the sand lorries. The lake filling was thus stopped during her tenure as *panchayat* president. This boosted initiatives of the government to save this lake.

Annexure V: Gramamukhya design process

Creation of Version 2.0

The *Gramamukhya* website has been developed on an open source platform Drupal 6.x. for it allows easy customisation and development.

Main usability features customised for the needs of the project are as below:

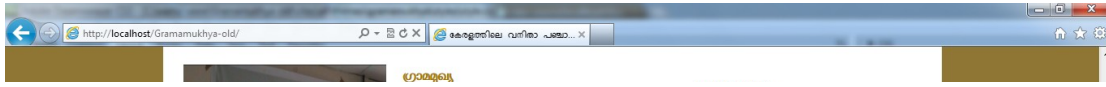
1. *Gramamukhya* home page
2. Malayalam text editor (*Puthiya Rachana*)
3. Image gallery (*Chithrangal*)
4. Member list block (*Angangalude Pattika*)
5. YouTube videos (*YouTube Chithrangal*)
6. Scribd
7. Dynamic font rendering

(a) *Home page of Gramamukhya*

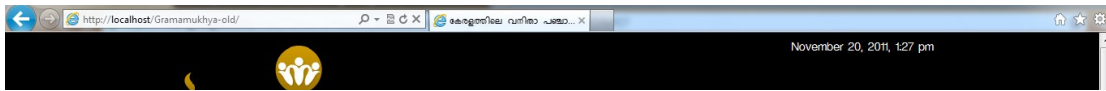
This is the home page of *Gramamukhya*. It is categorised into three main modules. These are **Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing** (*Arividam*), **Discussion** (*CharchaVedi*) and **Writers Blog** (*Ezhuthidam*).

In the first version, the style and alignment of these blocks was inconsistent across various browsers. each block was displayed in a different style and alignments in different browsers. This browser incompatibility was resolved in version 2 with the help of CSS (Cascading Style Sheet) and JavaScript.

Before



Now

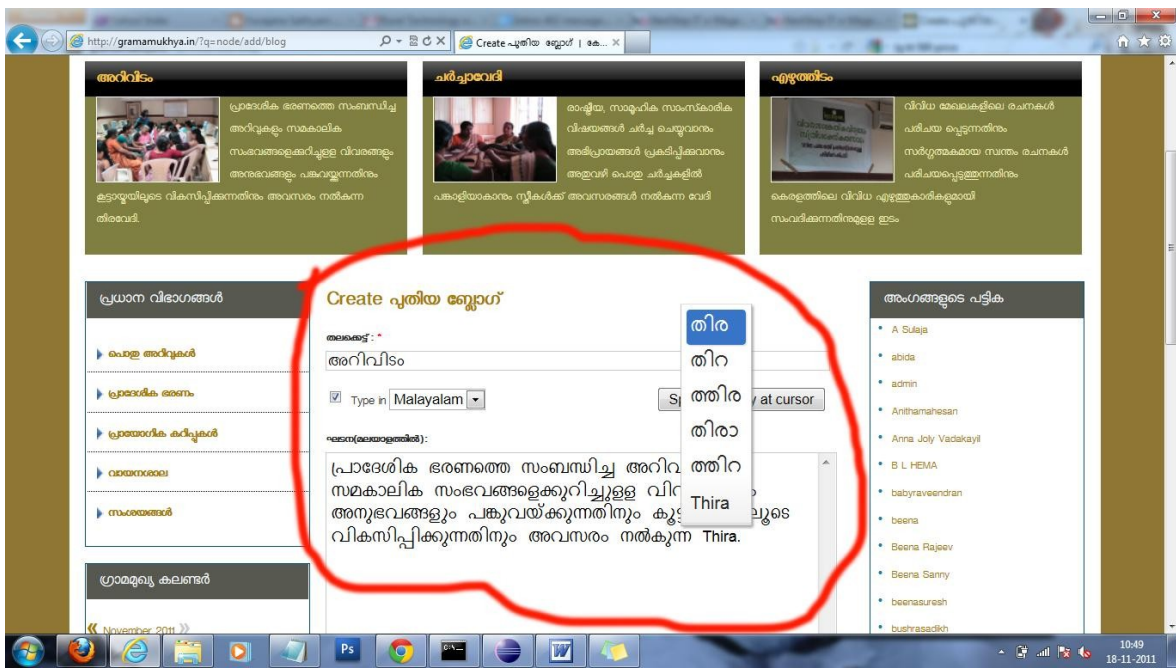
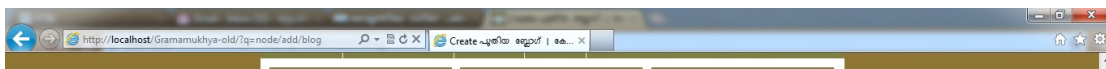


(b) Malayalam text editor (Puthiya Rachana)

This text editor will allow users to write content in Malayalam, with the help of Google Transliteration API (Application Programming Interface).

In first version, the text editor did not support local languages. It was a big challenge to create a new text editor which supports Malayalam language using an English keyboard. This roadblock was removed in version 2 through Google Transliteration API and Drupal Transliteration API.

Before



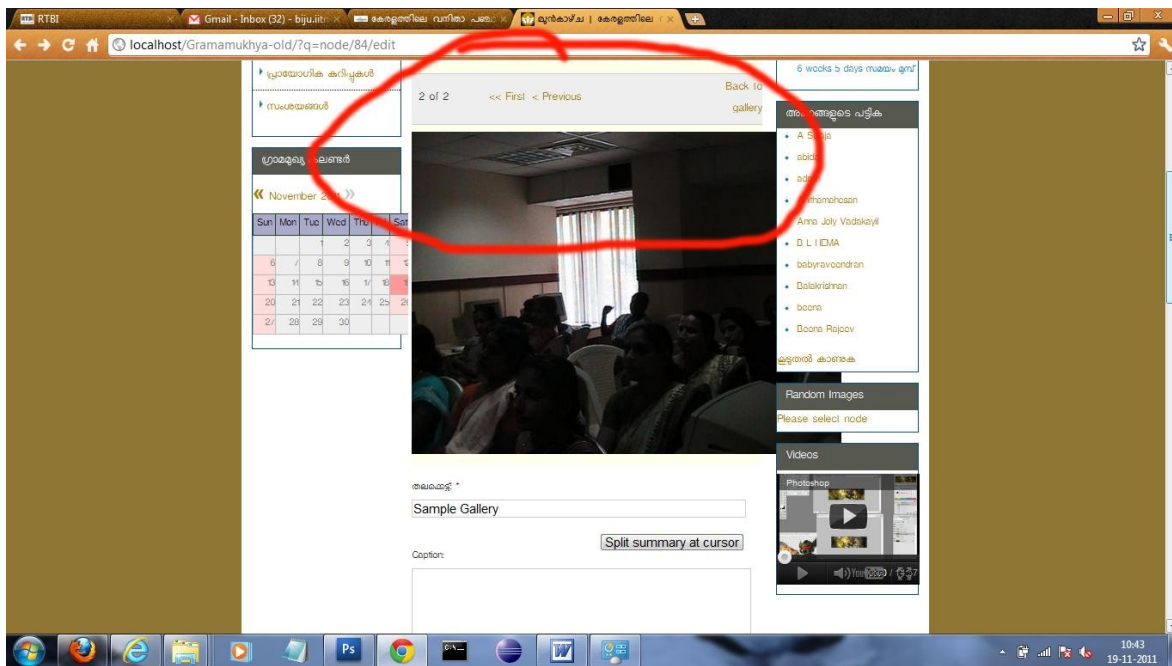
Now

(c) Image gallery

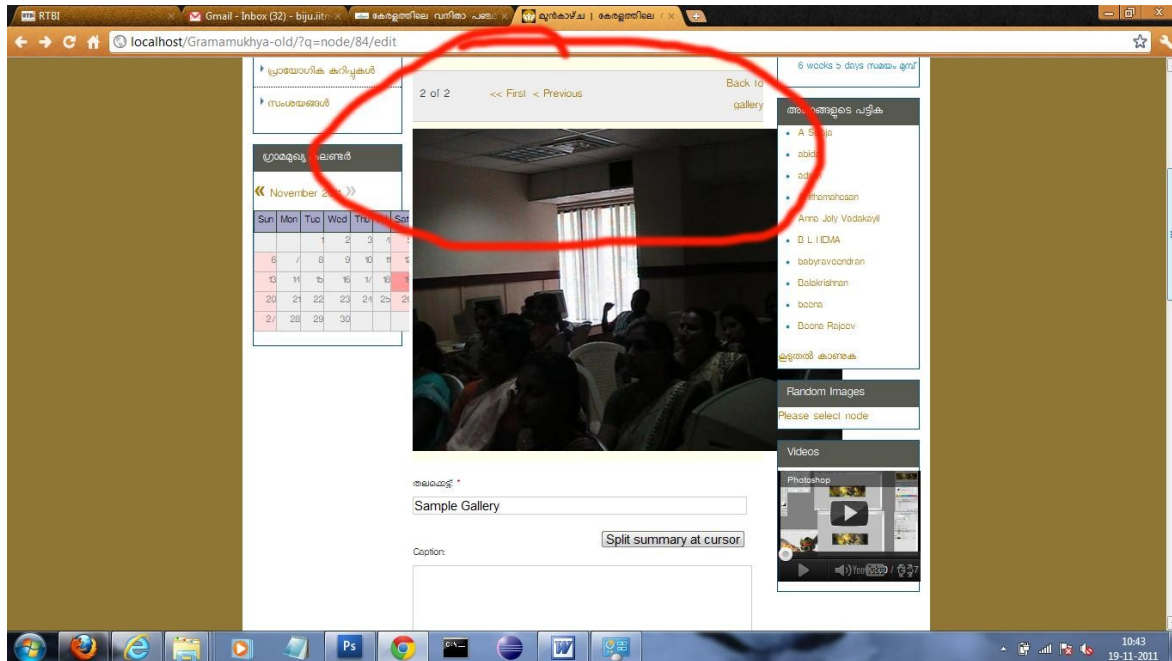
Image Gallery (*Chitrangal*) has been updated in the latest version of *Gramamukhya*. It allows users to upload images into a gallery and displays it in the form of a slide show.

In the first version, the slide show did not display the image sequence . To resolve this issue, a navigation bar was introduced in the second version using the Drupal Gallery module.

Before



Now



(d) Member list block (*Angangalude Pattika*)

This module creates several user lists, which may be viewed as pages and blocks. User lists may be displayed alphabetically, beginning with A-Z, by newest, or as a list of users who have posted content of a certain type. Lists may also be displayed by user role as well.

The first version showed a lengthy user list on the right block. This issue was resolved in the second version by adding a “Read more” button using the Drupal User List API.

Before



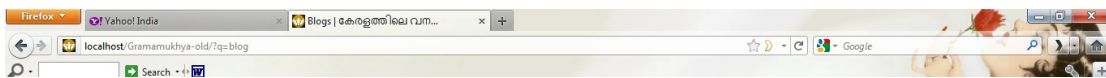
Now



(e) YouTube Videos (*YouTube Chithrangal*)

This feature was introduced in the second version. Using the YouTube code for embedding videos, videos are displayed on all of the *Gramamukhya* content pages. Additionally, users are redirected to the YouTube channel from the *Gramamukhya* website.

Before



Now



(f) Scribd

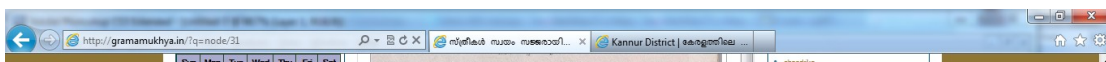
Scribd is a social publishing site for sharing documents. Its API enables us to embed uploaded documents in *Gramamukhya*.

In the first version, users were required to download attached documents to their local computer for viewing them. But the second version enabled them to read attached documents in their current web page, thus enhancing usability.

Before



Now

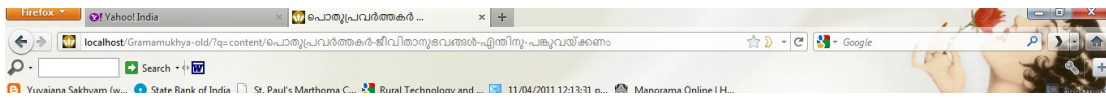


(g) Dynamic Font Rendering

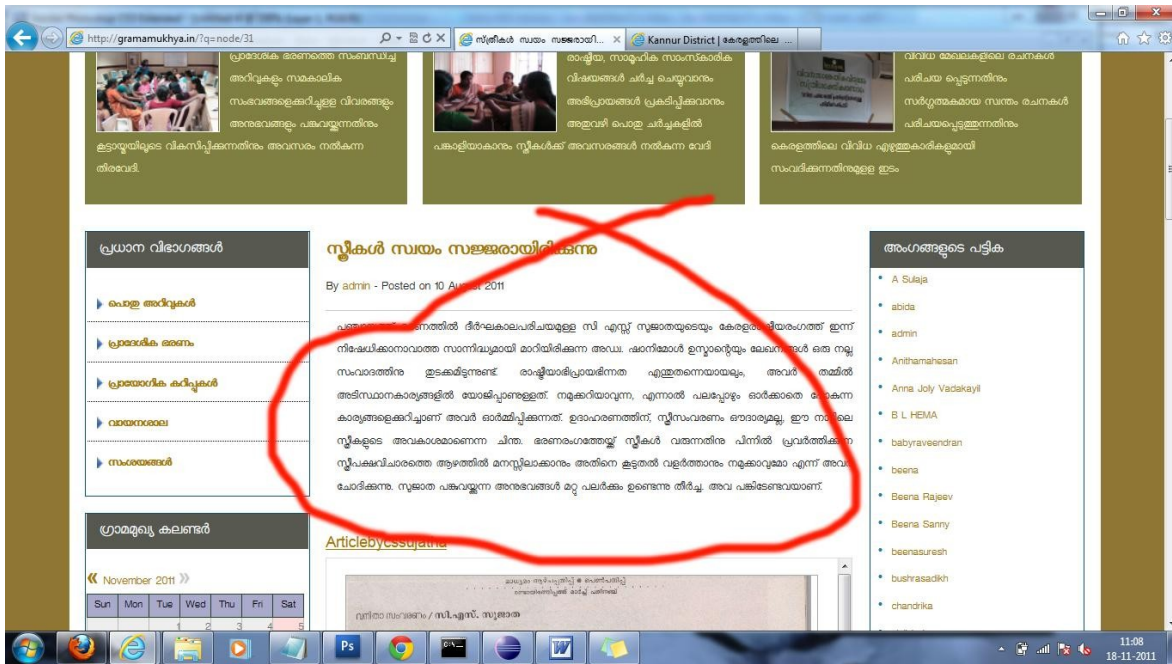
This module allows users to change font style according to their preference. By doing this, this module allows users to view texts in fonts not available on their computers. These fonts are stored on the server.

In first version, Malayalam font was not being displayed properly in different browsers. This problem was fixed in the second version with the help of Drupal's Dynamic Font Rendering API.

Before



Now



Annexure VI: Content generation plan for *Gramamukhya* prepared by Santhosh George

In order to develop content for the *Gramamukhya* project, Santhosh George was appointed as Research Associate from August 2011. He, under the guidance of Dr J Devika, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, developed a plan for the major content sections and also established a tentative time schedule for content generation and uploading.

I Knowledge Creation and Information Sharing Module (*Arividam*)

- 1) Series of articles interpreting the *Panchayati Raj* Act by Support Group members. The series is envisioned as a stream of articles on the experience of *panchayat* presidents on interpreting the *Panchayati Raj* Act. This content can be created by interviewing various *Panchayat presidents*.
- 2) Report of the Committee for Evaluation of Decentralised Planning and Development by Dr. M.A. Oommen- the Chapter on Women Empowerment (pages 127-138) from this report has been translated and uploaded.
- 3) Statistics on Kerala with pages on each district. For accessing this data, District Handbooks published by Public Relations Department (of the State) have been purchased. However, these handbooks comprise statistics for the year 2003 and hence are outdated. Dr. Devika has provided **provisional results for Kerala Census 2011** and the report, Statistics for Planning 2009, from the CDS library. The data we received has the following sections. *Our plan is to cull out data on each district and make a separate page for each of them.*
 - a. Kerala Census 2011 provisional
 - a.i. *District wise data regarding area in square kilometres, total population, population belonging to the age group 0-6, literacy rate, and Sex ratio*
 - a.ii. *Detailed tables on population density, population variation and change in sex ratio during twenty years. This section also includes literacy rate by sex and number of children.*
 - b. Statistics for Planning 2009

- b.i. This document has 23 files (minimum of twenty five pages) on demographic details, agriculture, animal husbandry, banking, crime, education, employment health industries, *Kudumbashree*, labour, land use, local bodies, population, power, price public, rural development, state finance, state income, tourism, transport, and water resources.

4) Queries by women presidents and responses

Nine questions were raised by *Gramamukhya* members. Dr Devika. in association with Smt. Beena Sunny, has answered these questions. These discussions have been posted on the website.

II Discussion Forum (*Charchvedi*)

1. An interview with Dr. M.A. Oommen on LSGIs.
2. An interview with women presidents (transcripts).
3. Sharing of experiences by women presidents on Women Component Plan (WCP), *Jagratha Samithi* etc. *Written documentation of experiences shared will be approved as and when they are received.*
4. Sharing of experiences by resource persons such as Smt. Beena Sunny, Smt. Seema Bhaskar and Dr. J Devika. *Written documentation of experiences shared will be approved as and when they are received.*
5. Articles by women writers and scholars on development, gender, agriculture, welfare, health, environment, education, industrialisation, non-resident *Malayalees* etc.

Articles

The following articles have been provided by Sri. Suresh KS in the form of scanned .pdf files. Introduction to these articles are written by Santhosh George and reviewed by Dr. Devika.

1. *Krishi officerkku enthanu pani* by Smt. S. Usha regarding the buying and selling of pesticides in Kerala.

2. *Therivakkukal* by Smt. S. Sharadakkutty on the politics of abusive language from women's perspective.
3. *Vivaham enna sthapanam* by Dr. Bettymol Mathew on how the institution of marriage exploits creativity and labour of women
4. *Sthreekalude aarogya prasnangalaum powravakasangalaum* by Smt. Seena S Thurutthil critiquing the Kerala Model of development from the perspective of women's health.
5. *Puzhakku nunakndu vilyidamo* by Dr A. Latha on the proposed Athirappally dam and its potential impact on tribals, biodiversity, waterfall and other people.
6. *Malayala Natakavediyum sadachara policum* by Smt. Sreelatha S. critiquing the Malayalam drama scene and school of drama from the perspective of a woman theatre person.
7. *Arivukalum anbhavangalaum kondu jeevitham sampannam*, an interview with Dr. M.J. Rajamma by Smt. Bindu Gopinath regarding her role as a woman in the political history of Kerala.
8. *Sthree madaypichu ennaropikkumbol* by Smt. Vinaya on how society victimised her by falsely alleging that she created a ruckus in her intoxicated state.
9. An experience of resistance against the moral policing in Kerala by Thasni Bhanu.
10. *Cesareante samoohya sastram* by Dr. Khdeeja Mumthaz questioning the false security offered by Caesarean section during child birth.

Introduction to the following articles have been written by Santhosh George and reviewed by Dr. Devika. They are currently being typed out.

1. *Anathikarathinte Bharanakoodaprayogangal* by Smt. Rekha Raj regarding the onslaught of military and police atrocities against women in the name of Indian nationalism.
2. *Chooridarinte viplavamattangal* by Smt. G Ushakumari on the change of power relations caused by the transformation of women's apparel preferences from *saree* to *chooridar*.

3. *Arajakathvamalla Laingika swathanthryam* by Smt. Sara Joseph critiquing the present cultural environment in Kerala that gives sanction to the sexual anarchy of men and takes away the basic sexual freedom from women.
4. *Chithralekhayude moonnu kuttangal* , an interview by Dr. Devika with Smt. Chithrlekha, a dalit woman auto driver who was persecuted in Kannur for exposing the caste and gender discriminations she suffered.
5. *Erakalum Kolapathakikalum* by Smt. Usha Thanal raising ethical questions against the unwillingness of Indian Government to ban Endosulphan in India.

Biographical notes

These notes are provided by Dr. Devika. Introduction to these articles are written by Santhosh George and reviewed by Dr. Devika. These notes are ready to be uploaded.

1. *Jeyalakshmi sadhyamayathu*, a note by Shri. P. L. Asokan on how Jeyalakshmi emerged as a minister from among the *adivasis*.
2. A note on Irom Sharmila regarding her decade-long non-violent struggle against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Manipur.
3. Notes on women's organisations in Kerala including *Anweshi*, *Sewa*, Kerala *Sthreevedi*, *Sahaja*, Dalit Women's Society, and *Sakhi*.
4. Biographical notes on present women leaders and writers in Kerala including Smt. K Saraswathamma, Smt. Devaki Nenminimangalam, Smt. Anna Chandy, Smt. Lalithambika Antharjanam, Smt. B Bhageerathamma, Smt. Lakshmi N Menon, Smt. K Ajitha, Smt Manthakini Narayanan, Smt. Kamala Suraiyya, Smt. KR Gowriamma, Smt. Nalini Naik, Smt Mercy Alexander, Smt TK Radhamani, Smt. CJ Annamma, Smt. Sara Joseph, Smt. Sugatha Kumari, Smt. Annamma Joseph, Smt. Arundhatji Roy, Smt. Ammukkutty George, Dr. AK Jeyashree, Smt. VP Suhra, Smt. Leela Menon, Smt. Vinaya , Smt. Thresyamma Mathew, and Smt. Usha.

Writer's Blog (*Ezhuthidam*)

The following stories provided by Dr. Devika – are ready to be uploaded.

- 1) *Asoka* by Smt. Sara Joseph

- 2) *Balidanam* by Smt. Sara Joseph
- 3) *Nilavariyunnu* by Smt. Sara Joseph
- 4) *Hridayam namme Akramikkumnnu* by Smt. K.R. Meera
- 5) *Mohamanja* By Smt. K.R. Meera

Poems by Smt. Vijayalakshmi, Smt. V.M. Girija, Smt. Anitha Thampi are awaited. Smt. Anitha Thampi has agreed to extend her support in collecting these poems.