

## Key findings from the CITIGEN Programme Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami, IT for Change April 2012

### A. The CITIGEN programme – Looking at the gender and citizenship question afresh in the information society

The Internet and linked Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have brought about a fundamental shift in the nature of social organisation, and to the architecture of social relationships. Today, we are simultaneously part of multiple communities, which do not overlap. The Internet has also enabled individuals – even as they may be tied to specific contexts – participate in the online political agora that has a global span. Straddling the 'virtual' and the 'real', individual subjects can deploy a hybridity that presents possibilities for a transformative politics.

From a feminist perspective, the impact of these changes on gender architectures is of special interest. The shifting boundaries between the 'public' and the 'private' and the emergence of hybrid political subjects are central to investigations around participation and power. The CITIGEN programme posited the notion of 'citizenship' as a conceptual lens to understand the way gender power works, and can potentially shift, in the emerging information society context. The lens of citizenship, it was felt, was a strategic choice for two reasons – it enables a study of the changing context of the rights, entitlements and agency of marginalised women in relation to the architecture effected by new technologies. More broadly, it also provides an entry point to interpret the contemporary through 'social' theories rather than only 'economic' ones that have held sway over the analysis of ICTs and development.

The Gender and Citizenship Programme in Asia (CITIGEN) has thus primarily explored the way the emerging techno-social paradigm is lending new meanings to, and being shaped by new meanings of, citizenship in the emergent social order.

The key research questions that the programme has explored are:

- How does the emerging techno-social paradigm shaped by new information and communication technologies recast the citizenship of women, particularly marginalised women?
- How do technological affordances interact with the social and institutional environment to shape women's citizenship?
- How does the female political subject emerge in the contemporary moment?

The Research programme adopted feminist multi-disciplinary approaches to interpret women's citizenship in the network society, through an inquiry of situated experiences of

women (and men) from across various contexts in Asia. Research teams in the programme explored intersections between, marginalised women's citizenship, and their participation in the network society. Using desk research, empirical studies and action research methodologies, they traced out the conceptual interconnections offering a commentary on the opportunities and challenges for marginalised women in the emerging techno-social context. A summary of the 5 research projects, undertaken as part of the programme, is detailed below.

- The research carried out by APWLD, Thailand focussed on examining how the mobile phone becomes a crucial political artefact in Hong Kong and Taiwan for migrant women domestic workers, in their struggles to build communication and solidarity networks.
- The study by the Women and Media Collective, Sri Lanka focussed on understanding how mobile phone networking enables the creation of an alternative, women-owned local media space - helping women come together and build an alternative discourse on democracy and citizenship.
- In India, the researchers used weblog platforms as an innovative point of departure for elected women leaders in Kerala to foster their in-group ties, as well as connect to a shared history of the women's movement in the state.
- The team from China explored the dynamics of the multiple counter-publics and alternative public sphere in Hong Kong and Guangzhou- two distinctly different cities under the regimes of post-colonialism and authoritarianism, respectively.
- The Filipino team undertook an action-research project for exploring how ICTs could be used effectively to build 'a politics of presence', in the context of a nation-wide struggle for the passage of a women's reproductive rights law.

Additionally, the programme invited six scholars to explore key ideas around the opportunities and challenges posed by the network society context to feminist action – these explorations were published as 'Think pieces' under the programme. Heike Jensen offered a feminist unpacking of communication rights, censorship, privacy and surveillance in the emerging networked public spheres. Margarita Salas critically analysed feminist movements in four Central American countries, also pointing to their inability to grapple with the structural aspects of ICTs. Desiree Lewis and Crystal Orderson reflected on the new repertoire of political practices opened up by social media and mobile-based activist networks in South Africa. Supriya Klangnarong explored emergent modes of Internet-based activism and the rise of the 'netizen' in Thailand. Farida Shaheed focussed on the new threats to women's empowerment, arising out of the strategic use of ICTs by regressive, political forces to further their control over women.

This summary presents the key research insights arising out of the 5 research projects and 6 think-pieces commissioned as part of the CITIGEN programme.

## B. What is happening through the use of ICTs to particular practices of citizenship?

1. The research suggests that the use of ICTs can enable the re-production of contextual histories through a new political grammar that socially marginalised women can use in their collective claims-making. For instance,

- The Minmini SMS is a clear instance of how the Tamil women built a shared meaning through an alternative news network in post-war Sri Lanka. Mainstream media was impervious to their realities.
- While SMSes in and of themselves may not signify political meanings, use by women's organisations – such as the dissemination of the indigenous version of Vagina Monologues through MMS, in South Africa, – shows how the mobile platform acquires political hues in the mobilisation around violence against women.

2. With the Internet and the online public sphere, the promise of a trans-local solidarity emerges as women's groups forge networks online. Such a shared space presents the architecture of a new place, where political subjectivity can be honed, from where hegemonic discourse can be contested and in which a new imaginary of citizenship is enacted.

- In the case of repressive regimes, the online space is used by women activists as an outpost for mobilisation, deliberation and resistance, as in China.
- For young women in Thailand, the net represents a new frontier for a 'free' culture that as 'netizens' they have the opportunity to co-create within a restrictive cultural context. Netizens' practices of citizenship for an 'open' Thai society transcend differences of political ideology and the barriers of gender, focussing on the singular goal of free speech.
- For the elected women leaders in local governance in Kerala, India, or the migrant women domestic workers in Taiwan, the deterritorialised online space (a moderated website in the case of the former or mobile phone based network, in the case of the latter) offers a closed, safe space. Here they come together to exchange their gendered experiences and build solidarity as political subjects with a shared history.

3. Digital space allows women marginalised from the mainstream public to assert their voice and claim their rights. Through digital artefacts and platforms, women can navigate a new politics of presence crucial to effective claims making.

- By forging a new public through their blogs, marginalised women in Manila politicised their material conditions of life. Rearticulating their vision of the reproductive rights law, they were able to bring to the public domain their situated experiences.
- In El Salvador, where the mainstream corporatised media did not offer space for feminist movements to voice their perspectives, women's groups extensively used social media and community radio to shape the public discourse on the Real Equality Law.

### C. As women use technologies and appropriate digital spaces, how do specific contexts – social and institutional – interact with, and influence the discourse of, gender and citizenship?

Understanding the citizenship of marginalised women in the information society involves two key analytical dimensions: emergent political practices through which women embrace technology, and the interplay between the social and institutional contexts in which ICTs are used by women, and technological affordances .

Findings discussed above are CITIGEN based insights on women's citizenship as a set of practices in sense-making, place-making and claims-making. Political practices of technology emanate from, and impinge upon, regimes of technology and society (including culture and policy) in an interconnected and continuous flux. The resultant shift in the discourse of gender and citizenship opens up context-specific opportunities and challenges for women's rights and citizenship, and for gender justice. Mapping the interplay of socio-institutional aspects of technology use and the parameters defining the technology space is critical to move towards an explanatory theoretical framework of gender and citizenship in the information society, discussed below:

***1. Women's citizenship in the information society emerges through new capacities for the political navigation of fluid and shifting public and private spheres. The digital presents a repertoire of possibilities for political action, but practices of citizenship presuppose availability and accessibility. They also depend on how individual subjects are enabled to navigate the context-specific trajectories for transformative action in the emergent techno-social-institutional amalgam.***

The digital realm – as an unbounded public space – also simultaneously allows the creation of closed private spaces. Its architecture presents at once possibilities for engaging both 'private' and public communication. The *Gramamukhya* platform was one of the action research projects in CITIGEN. It was set up to facilitate a dialogue between elected women representatives in Kerala, India, for building networks of solidarity based on their shared experiences of negotiating the hyper-masculinised spaces of local politics in Kerala. Here, the 'private-within-the-public' space was forged with a sensitive assessment of the need for women in local politics, to have safe spaces for developing a shared identity, cutting across political party ideologies. The site is moderated and deliberation is restricted to those who are part of the bounded political community. The Minmini SMS network has similarly enabled Tamil women in Sri Lanka to come together using a closed mobile network to connect as a political collective. And in the case of migrant women domestic workers in Taiwan, where the private sphere of the household is the 'public' work place that confines them, mobile phones enable them to politicise given notions of the public and private – to construct their own private spaces in public parks and to cast as public, the private realm of the household.

The evidence before us shows how, depending on availability and accessibility, contextual strategies may emerge autonomously as in the case of activists in China who have appropriated the online space for networking and creative forms of resistance. Producing and circulating video that uses satire, they discredit and expose the workings of the state. But harnessing digital possibilities for citizenship may need more than market mediated

availability. Accessibility presupposes felicity to know artefacts and navigate digital space, and this would call for interventions in bridging access with meaningful use. The Mobilize guide, that was produced and used for domestic workers in Hong Kong by one of the CITIGEN team, illustrates this.

Invariably, availability and accessibility notwithstanding, mobility from the margins to the mainstream requires innovative and strategic deployment of digital space. Using what is available and what may be more accessible, change agents will need to catalyse highly contextual and dynamic action for enabling meaningful political practices of technology. This would span deterritorialising strategies (such as the move to bring a geographically dispersed group of women leaders in Kerala onto a translocal web-based platform or the use of mobiles based message blast to kindle a sense of political community, as in Sri Lanka), reterritorialising strategies (such as the use of mobiles for mobilising a meeting or rally of migrant women domestic workers at a fixed place or the use of social media or online mobilisation strategies in China to call for on-ground protest) or hybrid combinations (as in the case of the citizen-bloggers of Manila who in addition to their street protests also used blogs and then moved to social media, to deepen their public presence on the issue of their reproductive rights). The repertoire of online and offline – or territorialised and deterritorialised actions – must come together in particular ways meaningful to women's situated and dynamic reality, to effect political change.

The 'place of their own' that digital technologies cement for women - to reflect on their shared experiences, cultivate a political subjectivity and journey through 'a discourse of actions' – may be seen as a significant departure from Westphalian imaginaries of citizenship. In the Global South, where those at the margins of the media and state have no formal discourses on the state-citizen relationship to fall back on, the online public sphere is a significant pathway in the repertoire of plausible citizenship practices. For women to navigate these spaces, as has been elaborated by the CITIGEN research studies, political education to appropriate ICTs becomes a pre-condition. The journey towards consciousness building about off-line and online continuities, and norms-building in the new space that shifts between private and public actions, constitutes new demands in navigating citizenship. In each of these contexts, the specifics of the techno-social-institutional amalgam present different trajectories for becoming fully realised political subjects.

***2. Citizenship practices are forced to contend with the contradictions of the 'politics of presence' – where the leap from asserting voice to actualising citizenship still hinges on the idea of the nation state. And yet, the practices of citizenship continue to embrace the trans-nationality of the online public sphere.***

In the online public sphere, marginalised women, as hitherto silenced groups, are able to claim space, assert their voice and build a 'politics of presence'. The citizen-journalism project in the Philippines, clearly demonstrates, the possibilities that ICTs open up for shaping counter-discourses. The online magazine that grassroots activists produced, clearly carved out a space for the articulation of a counter-discourse on women's reproductive rights - in a context where the mainstream public sphere was completely hegemonised by the Catholic Church. However becoming visible and being heard was still not easy.

Articulation of political identity, is not a sufficient condition in the age of multiple publics, for claims to actualise into rights. In fact, as was pointed out by the research done in China, dissent may be 'managed' by the informational state by conceding civil society the space to 'voice'. The concretisation of 'presence' into 'political capital' is thus not automatic. It is tied into the specific socio-institutional conditions of the context. And the context may or may not allow the 'legitimacy to deliberate' become a means to contest and claim a rights-based citizenship. Even as mobile phone based communications spawn new political communities not bound by national geographies, as in the case of migrant women domestic workers, the discourse around their rights in a globalised, neo-liberal world economic order is still tied very much to the discourse of national democracy. Citizenship in the information society encounters its limits here. With no institutional framework for a legitimate post-national global order, the promise of a trans-national citizenship remains just that.

Yet, to the extent that women at the periphery of society can become 'political communities with a global span', the transnational public sphere scaffolded by digital technologies continues to represent an aspirational threshold. Whether it be migrant workers in Hong Kong and Taiwan (making the journey from being a 'community of fate' to a 'community of solidarity') or the feminist movement in Honduras (building trans-national networks to support its resistance against the prevailing military dictatorship), hybridity in the information age is a vehicle not only for collective solidarities but also political contestation.

***3. Digital space presents a paradox – its architecture contains the promise of collective transformation, but its evolution bespeaks individualism, control by the state and capture by private interests. Embedded as they are, within this environment, women's practices of citizenship through the appropriation of technology are highly fragile. A feminist discourse of citizenship in the information society must therefore see the digital as highly contested.***

Even as ICTs open up spaces for furthering the feminist political project, online publics represent anything but bastions of deliberative democracy. Divided and insulated along class, race, caste and gender lines, online publics tend to be fragmented – producing an 'echo-chamber' effect, where users are completely cut-off from others with differing viewpoints. In Hong Kong, where online social media has become 'socialised' as a normal part of urban culture, feminist appropriation of digital spaces has lost its critical edge. The rise of populist online mobilisation is based on shared sentiments, rather than on alternative discourses of gender and citizenship. In mainland China on the other hand, feminist activism online, appropriates deterritorialised communication to build a collective translocal resistance against the repressive state.

The experience of censorship and surveillance has always been gendered. Unlike men, whose legitimacy to participate in public-political life has never been questioned – state ideologies in the public sphere, and household patriarchal controls in the private sphere, have always exerted censorship and surveillance over women exercising their public-political agency. The advent of Web 2.0 and digital media platforms has certainly opened up new opportunities for women's self-exploration, self-expression and the creation of communities, overcoming traditional forms of censorship and surveillance. But nation-states have adopted paternalistic frameworks of sexuality, claiming to protect women and children, in order to legitimise forms of Internet regulation and censorship that reveal patriarchal

anxieties about morality and women's freedoms.

Emerging digital platforms are also controlled by mega corporates who expropriate user participation online, commodifying it for profit. The increasing commodification of sexuality is spearheaded by the very same advertising industries that finance these Web 2.0 platforms. In such a context, women's enjoyment of their citizenship status hinges on strong initiatives to further both their communication rights and their privacy rights in all public spheres, be they digitally mediated or not.

A point about meso level structures in society. The breaching of the binary between the space of the private and the public that digital technologies enable may not always be emancipatory. This potential of ICTs is subject to capture by retrograde cultural forces. CITIGEN's think piece on the story of *Mullah Fazlullah* in the Swat province of Pakistan and his use of FM radio to by-pass household level patriarchal controls to reach out to women, and co-opt them into the Taliban's political agenda is a case in point.

The material and discursive facets of the digital realm determine the efficacy of the public sphere to mediate political transformation and gender justice in the information society. But the digital realm is itself constituted through its imbrication with the social-institutional, in the contested domain where technology meets society. Different social-institutional conditions it follows, will give rise to particular forms of gendered citizenship in the information society.

#### **D. What pointers for policy does the research reveal?**

The research undertaken as part of the CITIGEN programme has essentially focused on the following areas: understanding how the networked social order recasts the participation and political membership of marginalised women, re-shapes 'older' questions of social and gender justice, and fosters the development of new forms of female political subjectivities. As the earlier sections of this brief indicate, we have had to grapple with a number of questions at multiple levels of enquiry, in order to explore the new boundaries of gendered citizenship, both as a normative project and as an empirical practice. This has involved unpacking the multi-scalarity of the contemporary political arena, and interrogating hybrid subject positionalities that are digitally mediated.

The CITIGEN programme offers the following pointers for policy:

1. Public provisioning of ICTs needs to be recognised as a basic right of citizens in the network society context, and as a pre-condition for citizens to participate and exercise freedoms. It must also be kept in mind that the obligation of governments does not stop with setting up public access points, but also involves creating an enabling institutional framework, sensitive to the gendered and inequitable nature of society. This requires the creation of safe, community-based spaces with technology and connectivity for marginalised women to further their politics through learning and playing with technology, and comprehending the politics of technology.
2. Effective use of ICTs for citizenship practice requires more than providing ICT-

training to women – it involves the development of conscientisation models that can nurture the political subjectivity and feminist consciousness of women citizens.

3. Barrier-free access to new ICTs must be recognised as a necessary pre-condition for women to enjoy their freedom of communication. Legislative frameworks must be re-designed to protect and promote women's communication rights. These rights may be seen as encompassing women's right to access, privacy and security as well as rights of free speech, expression and association.