A HISTORY OF FEMINIST ENGAGEMENT WITH DEVELOPMENT AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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SUMMARY

The history of feminist engagement with digital technologies highlights one key takeaway: the need to integrate gender justice and economic justice concerns in feminist political action. The vision of the internet as an enabler of the range of social, economic, cultural and political rights of women and gender minorities, individually and collectively, cannot be actualised in the absence of recognition of their right to communicate – to the agency it bestows, and the structures it contains. The history of the right to communicate reveals the contestation between powerful status quoist forces and those who seek transformative, global change for justice and equality.

KEY CONCEPTS

Network economy: The emerging global economic order in which production and distribution are organised through digital networks that bridge time and space.

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Economic power lies with those who manage interconnections on these networks. Online platforms become powerful brokers who also capitalise upon the data traces generated through user activity. The network economy is marked by: precarious work; the reinforcement of the unequal, gendered transnational labour chain; privacy violations stemming from boundary-less data mining practices; and the increasing power of online platform intermediaries.

Right to communicate: The right to control and use the means of communication, whether digital or analogue. It includes freedom of expression, the right to participate in culture, linguistic rights, and the right to education. Pluralism, knowledge and media ownership are integral to the exercise of this right. The history of the right to communicate reveals the contestation between powerful status quoist forces and those who seek transformative global change for justice and equality.

Gender justice: A substantive concept that refers to comprehensive equality and social justice. Thus, in the field of internet governance, it is not only about access and online freedom of expression, but also about the ability to define the frameworks and codes that govern the internet.

Women's economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs): This bundle of rights includes women's right to determine their own future, for example, in relation to the right to work and social security; the right to determine their own identity; control over their sexual and reproductive health and rights; and the right to culture.

KEY FACTS

- The internet developed alongside neoliberal structural adjustment policies that had a deleterious impact upon women's rights and women's empowerment. Feminism has been visioned, since the 1980s, as inextricably entwined with economic rights and women's autonomy over their own bodies and their embodied experiences.

- Global conventions, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, enunciated important challenges to the fulfilment of women's rights in the arena of communications, but were limited by their failure to challenge the dominant economic paradigm and how it threatened women's, particularly indigenous women's, control over resources, including knowledge and land.

- The ascendance of neoliberal visions which depoliticised women's empowerment, trading on notions of increased efficiency through female participation in the workforce, have led to an increasing reliance on the model of partnerships with private corporations to tackle issues related to access. This elides the fundamental problem of women's right to communicate, and often allows corporations to set the terms of the debate and its resolution – helping to build inequality into access solutions.

INTRODUCTION

As the warp and weft of all social systems change with the indelible mark of the internet and digital technologies, there is a destabilisation of norms and rules. This is true for national and global institutions – from trade, commerce, financial markets, work arrangements, etc. to social and cultural arenas of communication, media and knowledge. The flux we are witness to can be harnessed by agile feminist action into a productive space that can mark a departure from traditional norms that define social power. But for this to happen, **feminists need to claim historical knowledge and build an informed framework of analysis and action**. So far, a strong civil and political rights framework has led feminist actions in the digital realm. Using the normative compass that feminist conceptual tools on development offer, digital rights activism must promote an idea of gender justice that accounts for the lived experience of women at the margins of the mainstream economy. This calls for a composite approach that underscores the indivisibility and interdependency of social-economic and civil-political rights.

This paper **historicises gender justice struggles and feminist engagement with information and communication technology (ICT) policies**, tracing the idea of development put forward by women from the global South through the years leading to the Beijing Conference on Women and later, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process. It looks at the media and ICT-related positions articulated by women's movements and the gains and continuing challenges for tackling patriarchal forces in a globalising world.

BECAUSE DEVELOPMENT MEANS FREEDOM FOR ALL

HISTORICISING GENDER JUSTICE IN ICT AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE POLICY DEBATES

The post-colonial history of socially and economically marginalised women's struggles in the global South,[1] and the perspectives on development and economy that were articulated through their lived experience, are important starting points for feminist activism in the internet arena. In the 1980s, an **unequivocal thesis was emerging from Third World feminism, challenging dominant economic theories**. The harsh conditionalities[2] for privatisation and deregulation that came with loans from the international financial system produced extreme distress, destroying livelihoods and weakening local institutions. Women in the margins, whose lives often depended on natural ecosystems, demanded an urgent reexamination of the hegemonic discourse of free markets and "trickle down" growth, which had led to a loss of control over their own bodies and destinies.[3]

In the 1990s, at the major UN conferences that have been turning points for global governance,[4] the standpoint of the most marginalised women in the global South brought to the fore the inseparability of justice and rights, as a cornerstone concept in development.

The political project of women's rights was not possible without economic justice. Third World women rejected any share of the emergent macro-economic model; they saw no meaning in partaking of the "poisoned pie".[5] They were clear that a vision for change cannot negate their visceral experiences as embodied people. Feminism was a project of democracy, to be able to imagine an equal place for everyone in the global economy. But gender justice was not merely a linear consequence of economic justice. Women's movements thus articulated an idea of equality that would bring them autonomy over their own bodies – their labour and sexuality – not dictated by mainstream "Western" institutions.[6]

> *These articulations reflected the continuum that freedom meant; the right to freedom from hunger and to come together and express solidarity were two sides of the same coin.*

Curating the practices and perspectives of women from the global South, feminist scholarship on development brought to the international arena rearticulated visions of development, built on an alternative economics.[7] The "sharing economy" conceived in these conceptions was based on the idea of a just world, different from its digital age meaning.[8] These articulations reflected the

1   This paper uses the term "global South" in a critical, post-colonial sense, to capture the particular historical-political experiences of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. International mainstream publications, including from the UN, use North and South interchangeably with developed and developing, respectively. While the term "global South" does come with its limitations, lumping together diverse political and economic configurations, it still remains valuable in understanding the cartographies of dependency and oppression etched by the long history of colonialism and its aftermath. "Global South" is indeed an overarching and somewhat slippery term, but like other such macro constructs, it also allows a grasp of the structural ideas necessary to signpost any focused discussion. See Wolvers, A., Tappe, O., Salverda, T., & Schwarz, T. (n.d.). *Concepts of the Global South – Voices from around the world*. Germany: Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne.

2   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_adjustment

3   Correa, S., Petchesky, R., & Parker, R. (2008). *Sexuality, Health and Human Rights*. Oxon: Routledge. silo-public.hunter.cuny.edu/a3e2748e5460a098c8c663a9ac3a4e5d42891043/Sexuality-Health-and-Human-Rights.pdf

4   Environment and development (1992), Human Rights (1993), Population (1994), Social Development (1995), Women (1995), Housing (1996).

5   Sen, G., & Grown, C. (1987). *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives.* New Feminist Library.

6   Mohanty, C.T. (1988). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Boundary 2, 12(3),* 333-58. www.weldd.org/sites/default/files/Mohanty_Under_Western_Eyes_240914.pdf

7   Sen, G., & Grown, C. (1987). Op. cit.

8   Alternative economic models explored in feminist literature are based on principles of solidarity, reciprocity and interdependence with natural ecological systems. The term "sharing economy" in the current context is often employed by Silicon Valley companies as a discursive tool to sell the idea of peer production and peer sharing of unutilised and underutilised assets over the digital marketplace. It has been critiqued by critical theorists such as Evgeny Morozov for its glib conflation of the idea of solidarity and cooperativism with collaborative work cultures controlled by digital platforms.

continuum that freedom meant; the right to freedom from hunger and to come together and express solidarity were two sides of the same coin. The idea of rights was about the inseparability of the economic and the political, the local and the translocal. The spatial scales of injustice were located as much in the intimate body as in the distant politics of aid controlled by powerful states and transnational institutions.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) made an explicit entry into the global women's rights agenda through the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing, in 1995. Feminists carried to Beijing a strong concern around cultural diversity and corporate control and the non-negotiable place for local articulations. Section J of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action[9] expresses the hope that if women have a say in how ICTs develop, ICTs could serve as alternative sources of information, to facilitate networking, to challenge derogatory stereotypes and instances of abuse of power by the media industry, to strengthen women's participation in democratic processes and to promote international, South-South and South-North cooperation. But, **the Declaration did not go far enough in acknowledging the injustice of the global economic system**. As the indigenous women's declaration[10] during the Beijing process asserted, "the overemphasis of gender discrimination and gender equality depoliticises the issues confronting Indigenous women", ignoring the powerful interests driving the "New World Order".[11] Section J does note the obstacles to women's ability to access the expanding electronic information highways, but, as was pointed out by indigenous women, remains uncritical of how trade liberalisation and open markets pose the biggest threat to indigenous women's rights to their territories, resources and intellectual and cultural heritage.

> *The mainstream view that the corporate sector held all the ICT expertise led to many pilots in the global South without respect for community-centred and participatory development processes.*

Before the beginning of the new millennium, feminists began to engage with policy debates within the UN, politicising the infrastructure aspects and drawing attention to the political economy of ICT markets.[12] The rapid winds of change in the information society also encouraged different UN bodies to explore how ICTs could be brought to the service of development.[13] In 2000, the UNDP, along with Accenture, a private consulting company, released the Digital Opportunities Initiative (DOI) report, a decisive, framing document that went on to shape the field of ICTs for development (ICTD).[14] The DOI report projected development mostly in terms of dominant economic growth paradigms. Even as an enabler of social development in sectors like health, education and governance, the private sector seemed to be entrusted with the leading role in ICTs. ICTD's success was pivoted on successful "business models". **This overarching, neoliberal ideology of an emerging field of development practice normalised a depoliticised vision of women's empowerment**, folding in a mix of women's entrepreneurship, enskilling and voice into a win-win, corporate-friendly approach. The report

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9   www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media.htm

10 www.ipcb.org/resolutions/htmls/dec_beijing.html

11 Before the Beijing Conference, the Report of the Secretary-General to the 39th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) noted that the global media environment posed threats of conglomerisation, monopolisation, cultural imperialism and disempowerment, with transnational media content further disempowering the powerless and destroying alternative spaces of articulation. These observations echoed threads from the highly contested and unresolved debate in the UN, between 1975 to 1985, on a "New World Information and Communication Order" (NWICO) that pitted developing countries primarily against the US and its media empires. See Jensen, H. (2006). Women, Media and ICTs in UN Politics. Progress or Backlash. In Gurumurthy, A., Singh. P., Mundkur, A., & Swamy, M. (Eds.), *Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues 2006.* Bangkok: UNDP-APDIP and Elsevier.

12 See Hafkin, N. (2002). Gender Issues in ICT Policy in Developing Countries: An Overview. Paper presented at the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting on Information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 11 to 14 November. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/ict2002/reports/Paper-NHafkin.PDF

13 UNESCO had been the leading player on communication rights issues until the New World Information and Communication Order stalemate. The ITU was concerned with the telecommunication infrastructure/connectivity issues.

14 Gurumurthy, A., & Singh, P. (2006). Civil Society and Feminist Engagement at WSIS: Some Reflections. In Gurumurthy, A., Singh. P., Mundkur, A., & Swamy, M. (Eds.), *Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues 2006.* Bangkok: UNDP-APDIP and Elsevier.

reflected the mainstream view that the corporate sector held all the ICT expertise, a premise that led to many pilots in the global South implemented without respect for community-centred and participatory development processes. It argued that ICT infrastructure in developing countries required a hands-off policy approach for private investment to lead the way.[15]

A consensus was shaping up in global policy processes in relation to ICTs. This was the time when the Millennium Declaration[16] paved the way for a **new "global cooperation" in which the benefits of new technologies would be made available to developing countries "in co-operation with the private sector". The UN ICT Task Force, set up in 2001, was dominated by representatives of IT multinationals**. Thus, the emerging global discourse on the information society gave development a new normal – empowerment without rights.

The year 2000 also marked the first stocktaking of the Beijing Platform for Action. The Report of the UN Secretary-General issued a strong warning. **The young information society was already gender biased and patriarchal**:

> (W)omen have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances. Women, therefore, need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies. Otherwise, the information revolution might bypass women or produce adverse effects on their lives.[17]

In 2002, feminist media and ICT activists were aware of this challenge, when the negotiation process began for a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The Summit was held in two phases – 2003 in Geneva and 2005 in Tunis. Two feminist groups were engaged in active lobbying at the WSIS: the WSIS Gender Caucus as a multistakeholder group made up of representatives from governments, international agencies, business, and civil society; and the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group, a civil society entity that sought to connect the key themes for advocacy from the Beijing

process with the WSIS.[18] The latter group espoused a critical feminist politics, and was mostly self financed.[19]

The WSIS Declaration of Principles (2003) reaffirms the right to the freedom of expression, a right that virtually all civil society organisations (CSOs), private sector actors and the vast majority of nation states, most importantly, nation states from the North, supported vociferously. However, **the hegemonic discourse was unwilling to admit a progressive "right to communicate" agenda**. Feminist advocates joined forces with other civil society groups attempting to push the Declaration away from its narrow techno-libertarian and market focus, calling for a broader human societies and knowledge and communication orientation. A little before the Geneva summit, civil society disassociated itself from the official WSIS process and came up with an alternative declaration. This process to give greater social and rights-based underpinning to the emerging notion of the information society was however dominated by CSOs from the North, with limited participation from Southern civil society.[20]

In the run-up to Tunis, seeing a new opportunity in the rapidly evolving information society, some governments of the South pushed for a global public good approach to the internet. Northern governments and their big businesses were however keen to detract attention from such claims to internet infrastructure. By the time of the Tunis summit, the private sector had already injected hundreds of millions of dollars into the communication sector in the South through public-private-partnerships (PPPs) to create loyal markets.[21] **As a direct consequence of private sector influence at national levels, policy imaginaries in the Tunis deliberations were limited by market fundamentalism.**[22] Not only did powerful governments from the North reject any kind of public finance solution to the "digital divide", but the issue of intellectual property and the erosion of the public domain was also firmly kept off the WSIS agenda. According to IP Watch,

15   Ibid.

16   Where the UN Millennium Development Goals, which are predecessor goals to the Sustainable Development Goals, were adopted.

17   UN Secretary-General. (2001). *Beijing to Beijing+5: Review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action*. New York: United Nations. Cited in Jensen, H. (2006). Op. cit.

18   ngo-wsis.genderit.org/meetingpoint1.shtml

19   Hafkin, N. (2004). Gender Issues at the World Summit on the information Society, Geneva. *Information Technologies and International Development 1(3-4),* 55-59.

20   Jensen, H. (2006). Op. cit.

21   Accuosto, P., Johnson, N. (2005), & Pieterse, J. N. (2006), cited in Chakravartty, P. (2007). Governance Without Politics: Civil Society, Development and the Postcolonial State. *International Journal of Communication, 1,* 297-317. www.ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20/41

22   Chakravartty, P. (2007). Governance Without Politics: Civil Society, Development and the Postcolonial State. *International Journal of Communication. Volume 1,* 297-317. www.ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20/41

Microsoft became an official sponsor of the WSIS Tunis summit, at least partially, as a way to intervene in the terms of the intellectual property rights (IPR) debate.[23]

> *At the WSIS Tunis summit, the future of the internet was crystallised in neoliberal terms, and normative explorations for its governance as a bulwark of global peace, equitable development and justice silenced.*

The fall-out was the legitimation of a new myth that the future information society in the developing South depended on forging win-win partnerships between private actors, governments and civil society. Consensus on democratising global internet governance also stood postponed, with the internet's technical and logical resources continuing to remain under US control. The feminist agenda was ghettoised into Paragraph 23 of the Tunis Commitment, acknowledging "the full participation of women in the information society", an uneasy interpolation into a structurally status-quoist framework. A **rights-based claim to ICTs (which would be much more than "overcoming the gender digital divide") was not admitted.**

This was perhaps a sobering moment, reasserting a recalcitrant, masculinist discourse, with little patience for marginalised women and economic justice.[24] The future of the internet was crystallised in neoliberal terms, and normative explorations for its governance as a bulwark of global peace, equitable development and justice silenced.

Soon after WSIS, as governments of the South busied themselves with ICT roadmaps, new policies and programmes on connectivity and e-governance, the UN and the global funding community turned towards other priorities, mainly the Millennium Development Goals. Meanwhile, traditional development actors in the global South remained distant from and even wary of technology-led "solutions" to complex challenges.[25] The spread of the mobile revolution gave rise to a new generation of development entrepreneurialism and the birth of a tech-oriented NGO sector. Pro-market ICTD had also paved the way for a penetration by corporations and their agenda into emerging networks of scholarship and research in the global South.[26]

A fracture in the appropriation of the digital by civil society was evident. It was somewhat inevitable. A solution-centric approach towards "women's empowerment" was being adopted by new age ICTD NGOs in the areas of livelihood and health improvement, public information access and such, but not informed by a political notion of rights. Meanwhile, feminist digital rights activists were engaging in struggles and alternative practices in relation to the online public sphere and its patriarchal essence at national and global levels. However, they were concerned mostly with the internet's impact on the communication sector, and not adequately equipped to address the deep-seated changes to the economy.

> *In the 2030 Agenda, ICTs are relegated to Goal 17, as a "means of implementation", resources that "the global partnership for sustainable development" (read marketisation of development) will deliver.*

23 Chakravartty, P., & Sarikakis, K. (2008). *Media Policy and Globalization: History, Culture, Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

24 Gurumurthy, A., & Singh, P. (2008). Cake for the North and Crumbs for the South? Challenging the Dominant Information Society Paradigm. Part of a collection of papers on Political Economy of the Information Society. www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/ITfC/PolEco-Gurumurthy.pdf

25 Souter, D. (2016, 7 November). Inside the Information Society: A short history of ICT4D. *Association for Progressive Communications*. www.apc.org/en/blog/inside-information-society-short-history-ict4d

26 Parthasarathy, B., & Aoyama, Y. (2016). Beyond ICTs and developmental domains: The historical specificity of ICTD. Published in Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development, Michigan, USA, 2-6 June. Article No. 26.

Even as the internet's influence on economic issues becomes more explicit and pronounced, the spaces for global policy discussions on these remain fragmented. The 2030 Agenda – finalised in 2015 – articulates a neutral and instrumental idea of digital technologies, including in the references to their role for women's empowerment. ICTs are relegated to Goal 17, as a "means of implementation", resources that "the global partnership for sustainable development" (read marketisation of development) will deliver. Throughout the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) related discussions, data for development was positioned by the developed countries as an apolitical, technical issue.[27]

The "plus 10" stocktaking of WSIS,[28] held in December 2015, while acknowledging the gender digital divide, seeks to "harness" the "crosscutting contribution" of ICTs for SDG delivery. The formal speak on ICTs in these global development policy conversations thus reveals **an assumption about technology as abstract, universal artefacts that can be added to the empowerment and development mix.** The realpolitik on the economic agenda, however, progresses through parallel rule making in secret deals initiated by powerful countries – as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Trade in Services Agreement have shown.[29]

The UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has been a vital arena for policy debates on the internet. During the Tunis phase, the issues of technical administration and oversight of the internet by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), then under the US Department of Commerce, did not get resolved. Hence, the Tunis Agenda called for "enhanced cooperation", a process that could enable all countries to participate in emerging international internet-related policies. It also mandated the IGF as a dialogic space for internet-related public policy discussions bringing together governments, businesses, the technical community and civil society actors. The "multistakeholder" dialogic format of the IGF has allowed emerging issues on internet policy to be framed, explored and cartographed through varying standpoints. However, the model itself – often referred to as a talk-shop[30] – has had no process for evolving a consensus on the necessary steps to crystallise internet-related public policy issues.[31] Further, the IGF space is no exception to traditional gender hierarchies.

> *Drumming up the ideology of "equal-footing multistakeholderism", the NETmundial meeting gave global corporates an equal seat at the table to draft outcomes.*

27   Gurumurthy, A. (2014). How can all forms of cooperation, namely North-South, South-South and Triangular Cooperation, as well as ICT for development, be utilised to achieve effective means of implementation for the post-2015 Development Agenda? Paper presented at UNPGA's High Level Event on Contributions of North-South, South-South, Triangular Cooperation, and ICT for Development to the Implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, New York, 22 May. www.post2015women.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/UNPGA-event-Anita-Gurumurthy.pdf

28   UN General Assembly. (2015). *Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society.* www.workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN96078.pdf

29   The leaked text of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Trade in Services Agreement reveal that these trade agreements contain many provisions that will expose citizens to rights violations in the digital economy in order to smoothen trade flows. For example, preventing countries that are party to the agreement from instituting conditionalities for source code disclosure in software imports or introducing legal requirements mandating local storage of data for specific purposes, such as protection of citizen data, etc. See Kilic, B., & Israel, T. (2015). *The Highlights of the Trans-Pacific Partnership E-Commerce Chapter.* https://www.citizen.org/documents/tpp-ecommerce-chapter-analysis.pdf; European Digital Rights Initiative. (2016). Trade in Services Agreement: EDRI's position. https://edri.org/files/TiSA_Position_Jan2016e.pdf

30   Gurstein, M. (2014). The Multistakeholder Model, Neoliberalism and Global (Internet) Governance. *The Journal of Community Informatics, 10(2).* www.ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/1125/1105 ; Kulesza, J., & Balleste, R. (2015). *Cybersecurity and Human Rights in the Age of Cyberveillance.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

31   Originally, the Tunis Agenda had envisioned the Internet Governance Forum as a dialogic space to complement a new global mechanism for internet-related public policy development that could fulfil the "enhanced cooperation" mandate. But in the current context where the development of the IGF has not been accompanied by concomitant progress towards the realisation of the enhanced cooperation mandate, the dialogues and debates at the IGF fail to translate into concrete policy measures.

In 2013, the Snowden revelations created a new impetus for public debate on internet governance. The expanding vortex of the surveillance machinery, including the complicity of powerful internet corporations, catapulted the governance deficits of the global internet into popular discourse. Against the backdrop of Snowden, the NETmundial initiative, believed to have originated in US policy circles, was taken by ICANN to Brazil. The NETmundial meeting was hosted by Brazil in 2014. Drumming up the ideology of "equal-footing multistakeholderism",[32] the forum gave global corporates an equal seat at the table to draft outcomes. The big corporations ensured that their commercial interests were protected and promoted – for instance, on intellectual property[33] – while ICANN was able to avoid strong language with regard to the process of transition of its oversight. Non-governmental actors were unable to grasp the grave implications and the meeting's undermining of democracy and justice.[34]

In 2014, the US Department of Commerce announced its intent to transition key internet domain name functions of the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) to a "global multi-stakeholder community." IANA was a unit of ICANN, under a contract with the Department of Commerce. In late 2016, the IANA functions were transferred to Public Technical Identifiers, an affiliate of ICANN.[35] The privatisation of IANA and its transition to the internet multistakeholder community still leaves a democratic deficit in internet governance. **A huge body of feminist scholarship tells us that the evocative and vague rhetoric of "community" hides divergent interests**. The ICANN-spearheaded process for "community" consultation was neither fully open, nor fully representative.[36] Actual participation on the open mailing lists did not reflect the composition of the "global multistakeholder community", that is, the universe of internet users.[37] Most importantly, ICANN, and IANA, remain under the jurisdiction of the US, and thus subject to US laws and courts.[38] This reflects a longstanding problem of global internet policy being straitjacketed by the diktats of US business interests, since the first ever policy framework for the internet was the US framework for global electronic commerce.[39]

Unilateral oversight by the US over governance of critical internet resources, the absence of a global public policy framework on the internet, and the dominant role played by global digital corporations in creating the normative structures for and around the internet highlight the crisis of representation in decision making and the rule of law in global internet governance.

The potential of the digital is still not well understood by governments and civil society in the South. The ever-widening presence of big digital corporations in these countries marks a new wave of imperial control, shaping cultural values and socio-economic structures. Many countries simply do not have the wherewithal to provide the necessary physical infrastructure. **Institutional responses are ad hoc, and appropriate regulatory remit with respect to crucial, new issues with public interest implications almost absent.** These implications include the uberisation of all sectors, data protection, taxation, and foreign direct investment in e-commerce. Also, the new economic elite in "emerging economies" are eager to be part of the global networks of power, eschewing perspectives that are based on national interest and global justice. The interests of the marginalised get traded in favour of free market rhetoric in global negotiations.

The richer countries, on the other hand, have progressed considerably in foundational legal-policy frameworks, such as the recent EU right to explanation with respect to algorithmic decisions. On the global stage, these countries consolidate their power by using traditional methods

32 Strickling, L. (2015), cited in Hill, R. (2016). *Internet governance, Multi-stakeholder Models, and the IANA Transition: Shining Example or Dark Side?* www.apig.ch/Chatam%20IG%20formatted%20final.pdf

33 Singh, P. J. (2014). Global Internet governance: A developing country perspective. *Third World Network.* www.twn.my/title2/resurgence/2014/287-288/cover02.htm

34 Singh, P. J. (2015). A Fork in the Road to the Future of Global Internet Governance: Examining the Making and Implications of the NETmundial Initiative. *Digital Debates: CyFy Journal 2015.* www.globalpolicyjournal.com/projects/gp-e-books/digital-debates-cyfy-journal-2015

35 Gerich, E.(2016). IANA Services Update. https://ripe73.ripe.net/archives/video/1439/ and www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RIPE

36 The Just Net Coalition has highlighted the opacity, lack of transparency and illegitimate manipulation of this process by the United States. See the Just Net Coalition's public comments on the IANA Stewardship Transition proposal, at justnetcoalition.org/2015/on_IANA_transition_general.pdf.

37 The Centre for Internet and Society's analysis of the five main mailing lists where the IANA transition plan was formulated reveals that the process was predominantly driven by Western men from the industry/technical community. See cis-india.org/internet-governance/blog/global-multistakeholder-community-neither-global-nor-multistakeholder

38 Statement issued by eight Indian civil society organisations, supported by two key global networks, involved with internet governance issues, to the meeting of ICANN in Hyderabad, India on 3-9 November 2016. https://www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/Jurisdiction%20of%20ICANN.pdf

39 https://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/Commerce/read.html

of closed door, plurilateral/intergovernmental negotiations (as in the case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership) or ad hoc forums where deals are struck with the digital behemoths under the cover of multistakeholderism, methods that compromise public interest.

A cogent feminist critique of network capitalism and its capture of state institutions is nascent or simply absent, in most countries of the global South. Reclaiming the space of critique of the macroeconomic model upon which the network society is predicated is therefore a much needed feminist endeavour.

FEMINIST ENGAGEMENT IN ICT AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE POLICY SPACES

During the early phase of WSIS, activists cautioned against the repercussions of engaging in a multistakeholder ICT space.[40] Susanna George, from the NGO Gender Strategies Group, reflects on this blow to consensus on a progressive women's rights agenda in the outcome documents:

> The multistakeholder platform … where NGOs were supposed to enact their "progressive" advocacy, was intrinsically flawed, with the unquestioned presence of the private sector, the multinational corporations, at the negotiating table. Yet, we were seen as being uncooperative when we said that the multi-stakeholder platform was an uneven playing field. Ultimately, civil society as an entity preferred to hold its peace in favour of the "collective" process, which produced a pro-market, pro-neoliberal policy declaration.[41]

Gender politics in the WSIS was a manifestation of a changing feminist advocacy terrain in the UN. The early 2000's saw the birth of the Global Compact, through which businesses committed to supporting the

Millennium Development Goals. Partnership with business entailed private sector adoption of the women's equality agenda, and a re-purposing of gender justice as something with beneficial, efficiency-related consequences.[42] **The emergent neoliberal order made it practical to dumb down feminist vocabulary and argue a business case for gender equality.** As discussed earlier, with the digital revolution, the private sector were fashioned as credible experts who can shape development. In the UN, funding support for civil society representation from the global South diminished, and consequently, movements-based feminist participation from the South gave way to North-led, NGO-based forms.[43]

For feminist advocates, the structures of engagement in the digital arena in general and in the IGF in particular have posed a lack of real choices. Interjecting feminist thought into a dominant, technicalised discourse has involved "creative pragmatism" to keep the dialogue going. **Engaging business and governments has meant adherence to a politics of process rather than a critical politics of resistance.** Thus, for example, development issues from a social justice perspective have remained subdued in the IGF, too contentious for an amicable multistakeholderism. The "meta dialogue" at the IGF is thus symbolised by an inevitable opportunism to find convergence among actors motivated by disparate goals. This includes governments, big and small businesses, global and local consulting firms, status quoists and anarchists from the technical community, NGOs and gender equality organisations of varying persuasions. This opportunism can involve the silencing of critical issues, especially those of an economic nature affecting the most marginalised.

Over time, feminist digital rights activists at the IGF have emphasised the importance of gender-based parity in participation, instituting measures such as score-cards and advocating diversity in speaking slots. Progress in terms of numbers of women in panels and numbers of women participants has been achieved. Heike Jensen has pointed out how these "compensatory measures" in "a deeply flawed and unjust system of global governance" may have seen some success in gendering the "headcount", but have not destabilised

40 Esterhuysen, A. (2005, 1 April). Multi-stakeholder participation and ICT policy processes. *Association for Progressive Communications.* www.apc.org/en/news/access/world/multi-stakeholder-participation-and-ict-policy-pro Esterhuysen points to how "the consensus model has made it very difficult for participants in the civil society space to produce content that can inform, influence and critique the official WSIS discourse in a substantial way."

41 Gurumurthy, A. (2005). Civil Society and Feminist Engagement at WSIS: Some Reflections. Paper presented at the seminar on Gender Perspectives on the Information Society – South Asia Pre-WSIS, 2005. www.itforchange.net/sites/default/files/ItfC/anita.pdf

42 More recently, McKinsey & Company published its 2015 flagship report finding USD 12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 by advancing women's equality.

43 Charkiewicz, E. (n.d.). Beyond Good and Evil: Notes on Global Feminist Advocacy. *Isis International.* www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=517:beyond-good-and-evil-notes-on-global-feminist-advocacy&catid=116&Itemid=452

the "invisible" power structures calling the shots. They have instead contributed to the "hijacking of feminist positions" by statist and corporate interests in specific issue areas such as cyberbullying, the rights of children, free speech and intermediary responsibility. **This leaves untouched the real debate about structural and institutional transformation of the internet for global justice.**[44]

Thus, more women does not always mean feminist change. Open participation still denies entry into the fiercely guarded spaces of technical exclusivity to those without either the means or the devices to engage with the elite status quo. It also does not engage the inherent plurality of feminist positions. But more importantly, as has been argued by various scholars, civil society actions by marginalised publics in post-colonial countries of the global South are at variance with the Northern, Eurocentric model adopted by global civil society.[45] For the poorest women in these countries, claims-making is aimed at the state around redistributive demands. The prosaic questions of access to services, food and land, access to state officials and remunerative employment drive these movements. Global civil society actors in internet governance, despite their best intentions, have left these questions unaddressed.[46] This is not to say that feminists are not chipping away at hegemony or playing a role in shaping the terms of the politically possible in the IGF. But it is to underscore that **multistakeholderism in the IGF sense makes challenging neoliberalism and its mutations – essentially an antagonistic politics – in countries dependent on global IT capital highly difficult.** The financial support for participation in the IGF by digital corporations to NGO representatives from countries of the global South also structurally limits the possibility of a productive and progressive feminist politics that addresses social justice and builds on the normative legacies that come from the frameworks of Third World feminism.

44 Jensen, H. (2013). Whose internet is it anyway? Shaping the internet-feminist voices in governance decision making. *Global Information Society Watch*. www.giswatch.org/institutional-overview/womens-rights-gender/whose-internet-it-anyway-shaping-internet-feminist-voice

45 Chatterjee, P. (2001). On Civil Society and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies. In Kaviraj, S., & Khilnani, S. (Eds.), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Chandhoke, N. (2002). *The limits of global civil society.* www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/civilSociety/yearBook/chapterPdfs/2002/chapter2.pdf

46 Chakravartty, P. (2007). *Op. cit.*

However, through the years, **feminist advocacy has taken some significant strides in the internet governance spaces**. This has been done through cementing human rights – in particular, civil and political rights – within the debates, and strategically using the work of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. Thus, for example, feminist activists, along with other civil society groups, have taken up the issue of mass surveillance and privacy. This was a long and hard road with predictable resistance from state actors. Feminist actors have also pointed to corporate double standards in tackling questions of body and representation, demanding that internet intermediaries take cognisance of gender-based violence online. At the IGF, rights in relation to identity and sexuality have been articulated at workshops discussing the deleterious impact of surveillance on agency, embodiment and political mobilisation, and underscoring the fact that pleasure and desire are deeply political. Feminists have diligently carved out spaces in both the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Commission on the Status of Women to frame issues on gender, digital technology, bodily integrity and rights.

> *The masses who seek goodies from the connectivity miracle are not aware of the unfreedoms they sign up to.*

The introduction of debates around economic, social and cultural rights in the main IGF plenary in 2016 is also noteworthy. However, the private sector zealously watches over and safeguards its interests in norm development and rule making. Meanwhile, the masses who seek goodies from the connectivity miracle are not aware of the unfreedoms they sign up to. For activists fighting battles towards digital age democracy and global justice, there is little standing space (in digital time) to embrace new knowledge and tactics to target regressive and anti-feminist information society developments. This challenge is most evident in the need to be informed about, and participate in, all the multiple and fragmented forums that concern digital technologies and the internet. This stretches feminists with limited resources and excludes the majority who are not yet in the fray.

Recalling Heike Jensen's piercing analysis about the unfinished task of transformative change, it must be noted that:

> Internet governance constitutes a new global political field that has been elaborated during a time period of comparatively strong feminist and social justice constituencies at the global level. Nevertheless, it has been established as a sphere that perpetuates male hegemony in general and hegemonic business masculinity in particular. Feminist input in this field has at best attained the status of a marginal add-on. Neither the agendas and the issues and their framing, nor the abstracted nature of masculinity and patriarchies, nor the actual predominance of men in the respective forums have successfully been challenged.[47]

The immediate task for feminist engagement in relation to internet governance is twofold. Firstly, "access" related issues are often spoken about in mainstream internet governance discussions without a strong rights-based analysis. The **meanings of connectivity for the empowerment and autonomy of marginalised women concern the relationship between access and a range of freedoms** – privacy, voice, political participation and economic autonomy/non-dependency. Therefore, politicising access, and situating it in relation to the interdependency of women's civil-political and socio-economic rights, is vital. Equipping feminist frameworks on development and digital technologies with analytical depth about the techno-material and governance structures of the internet (including about net neutrality, critical internet resources, data management, etc.) requires attention. Essentially, this is about understanding the nature of new networked political, social and economic relationships and building a dynamic and strong analysis around "what kind of access?" and "access to what?".

Secondly, digital rights activists need new strategies to frame issues relating to the political economy of the information society. The directions for intervention at national levels are bound to differ, but at the global level, **venues and alliances for concerted, collaborative action are needed.** This means reaching out to social movements and networks that have built an enduring presence on the global stage in their struggles against corporate impunity and undemocratic global governance. Expanding the contours of feminist knowledge and analysis on how the "network-data complex"[48] redefines trade, finance, intellectual property, media, and other crucial global justice issues as well as the self, inter-subjectivity and personal identity is a necessary first step.

In the post-WSIS years, feminist digital rights activists lobbied the big digital corporations to take due cognisance of women's human rights online. The rhetoric of civil and political freedoms online has resonated well with informational capitalism, eager to be identified with the discourse of "user freedoms".[49] Facebook's India campaign[50] on Free Basics was about urging women to take "a first step towards digital equality". The role of international North-based organisations in promoting the "democracy sector" within Southern civil society has been well documented.[51] **The "internet freedom" platform of Northern governments, corporations and NGOs has expanded investment in the South, cultivating a genre of digital rights activism decoupled from resistance movements challenging neoliberalism.**[52] The libertarian ideas of freedom almost naturally intersect with market ambitions to reach the unreached and provide ostensibly "empowering" access. As Rosi Braidotti says, post-modernity in the network society has spawned a perverse confluence of interest between the politics of recognition and ideologies of the market.[53]

> *Post-modernity in the network society has spawned a perverse confluence of interest between the politics of recognition and ideologies of the market.*

47 Jensen, H. (2013). Op. cit.

48 Randhawa, S. (2015, 17 June). A legacy on how gender is built into the way we discuss and use technology. *GenderIT.org*. www.genderit.org/articles/legacy-how-gender-built-way-we-discuss-and-use-technology

49 Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage.

50 images.indianexpress.com/2015/12/facebook_freebasics_big2.jpg

51 Jenkins, R. (2001), cited in Chakravatty, P. (2007). Op. cit.

52 Gharbia, S. B. (2010, 17 September). The Internet Freedom Fallacy and the Arab Digital Activism. *Nawaat*. www.nawaat.org/portail/2010/09/17/the-internet-freedom-fallacy-and-the-arab-digital-activism/

53 Braidotti, R. (2006). Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity. *Rhizomes, 11-12*. www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html

However, shared vocabulary or willingness to dialogue may not be durable methods for gender justice.[54] On the contrary, feminist advocacy could lose ground in the longer term by vesting power to mediate social relations in digital corporations, already in the business of transgressing the personal and marketising the public. Feminist talk must therefore walk the sacred line of the indivisibility and interdependence of all rights, asserting how freedoms in the information society are inextricably tied to an egalitarian internet. Tactical feminism is bound to meet its limits without a responsible politics; there can be "no empowerment without rights and no rights without politics."[55]

CONCLUSION

The history of feminist engagement with digital technologies highlights the need to integrate gender justice and economic justice concerns in feminist political action. Feminists need to be aware and to challenge the over-arching frameworks that dictate both the structure of the internet itself and the structures of the processes governing the internet. They need to recover the internet and digital technologies from predatory marketisation and pervasive authoritarian control, resignifying them as the architecture of a just world where women's full range of social, economic, cultural and political rights as individuals and collectivities are met. A reflexive gender trasnformative praxis that feeds the radical imagination is needed to respond to the particularities of power relations, as digitalisation spawns a new world.

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54   For example, Facebook's willingness to set up a mechanism to address online gender-based violence and initiate dialogues with women's rights organisations on this issue does not necessarily translate into effective redress. Mac Cormaic, R. (2016, 2 January). On the frontline of Pakistani women's fight against online abuse. *The Irish Times*. www.irishtimes.com/news/world/asia-pacific/on-the-frontline-of-pakistani-women-s-fight-against-online-abuse-1.2482474

55   Sen, G., & Mukherjee, A. (2013). No Empowerment without Rights, No Rights without Politics: Gender-Equality, MDGs and the post 2015 Development Agenda. One of a series of papers in a research project, The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for Human Development and Human Rights. www.cdn2.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2013/09/SenMukherjee_PowerOfNumbers_HSPHDRAFT_2013_jg_revisions.pdf

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