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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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Whose internet is it anyway?
Shaping the internet – feminist voices
in governance decision making

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Gender politics in internet governance can be fruitfully explored at two levels. At the level of feminist interventions, gender is often conflated with women and girls, on whose behalf normative commitments and specific measures are sought. Attention to the link of gender with other forms of social hierarchies may lead to nuanced propositions on behalf of particular groups of women and girls, for instance, rural women or poor black girls. Nevertheless, the female category appears quite straightforwardly as that which defines these groups of people and their specific roles and needs. At the level of the larger political processes in which these feminist policy interventions are embedded, gender can be analysed as an abstract system of power and representation through which the dominant, hegemonic forms of masculinity are negotiated. Here, gender remains implicit because the institutions, constituencies and issues appear deceptively gender-blind. With such twofold analysis, I will now contextualise the achievements of progressive gender politics as part of the complex gendering mechanisms currently at work in a sphere like internet governance.

Normative feminist legacies at the global level

Feminists working in internet governance can draw on a substantial legacy created by many decades of feminist involvement at the global political level. Most recently, feminists have become a highly visible political constituency in the course of the world conferences on women held by the United Nations in 1975, 1980, 1985 and 1995. The agreed conclusions and the follow-up process of these conferences, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that entered into force in 1981, constitute the most comprehensive global political tools to date. They have spelled out a normative framework of non-discrimination, women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment that is meant to be applied in all spheres of policy making.

Gender mainstreaming

To apply this normative framework, the strategy of gender mainstreaming has been mandated at global as well as regional, national and sub-national political levels since the late 1990s. Gender mainstreaming calls for an analysis and a consideration of women's and men's stakes in all policies and programmes and at all stages, from design to implementation to monitoring to evaluation. Unfortunately, gender mainstreaming has never been consistently applied. Because of this, in internet governance, just as in any other field of politics that does not exclusively and explicitly address gender, political processes are initiated and agendas are set without any explicit attention to the gender stakes involved. Such an approach does not create random gender effects, however, but bolsters male hegemony and hegemonic masculinity.

Male political hegemony

The crux is to understand that male hegemony and patriarchies perpetuate themselves in political and economic arenas by not drawing attention to themselves as gendered and hierarchical undertakings. Instead, they claim a universal outlook, but this outlook, far from being universal, is informed by quite specific standpoints and habits of perception. It is an outlook indebted to privileged positions in the hierarchy between men and women as well as the hierarchy among different groups of men. In internet governance, in which privileged perspectives of the global North and the global South meet, information and communications technologies (ICTs) are for instance predominantly framed as tools for economic power or as tools potentially threatening national sovereignty and security. While these framings are challenged by those who frame ICTs in relation to development and human rights, even the latter contribute to male hegemony as long as they relate development and human rights only to an abstracted citizen-subject and not to specific groups of women and men with differing concerns and needs.

Male hegemonic institutions

When male hegemonic factions compete for the predominance of economic, multilateral, developmental or human-rights related frameworks for ICT policies, their comparative influence can already be judged by the kinds of political institutions in which the crucial debates and power brokering are housed. The internet governance sphere is particularly varied in this regard. It ranges from the global level of institutions such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), to regional and national institutions and their divergent approaches and mix of stakeholder groups. Each of these institutions has a unique historical trajectory of hegemonic positions, reflected in the internal agreements these have achieved over time.

From a feminist perspective, the institutions vary tremendously in terms of the possibilities for meaningful involvement, from relatively open setups such as the IGF to relatively closed ones such as the ITU. Many deliberative processes that are open to all concerned stakeholders are very drawn out and consequently require a lot of time, attention and financial resources, such as the negotiations concerning generic top-level domains (gTLDs) that took place in ICANN. In other scenarios, the political weight of the final outcome may be very uncertain, such as with the IGF, UNESCO or UNDP. Yet other processes with high political stakes may largely be conducted behind closed doors, for instance at WIPO.

Homosocial setups

In internet governance, as in many other spheres of politics, women are still under-represented in each stakeholder group, and particularly so as real power brokers and visible experts, including panellists. Because of this, a special measure for women that has consistently been advocated by many feminists is affirmative action in internet governance deliberative and policy-making bodies. But normative commitments, such as the acknowledgment of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that women should fully participate in all decision-making processes, are not even implemented in forums that directly follow from WSIS, such as the IGF and comparable forums at the regional level.

Conceptually, women's involvement of course needs to be differentiated from feminist involvement, since both men and women can either be complicit with male hegemony or oppose it and take feminist stances. However, it has long been argued in feminist circles that a critical mass of women in any institution is needed to enable women to begin developing feminist positions. This includes an analysis of the gendered stakes in supposedly universal issues.

Hegemonic framing of issues and agendas

The standpoints and habits of perception of comparatively privileged men lead to the identification of certain political issues and their adoption within specific rhetorical frameworks. Consequently, any mainstream political agenda of issues already represents the outcome of power struggles among groups of privileged men, and the outcome of the subsequent policy debate largely reflects which groups of men have achieved dominance, or in gendered terms, which groups of men now represent hegemonic masculinity.

Such processes of agenda setting and framing successfully serve to alienate many women – and also groups of men – and keep them from entering the political process in the first place. Many marginalised groups neither relate to the issues, nor is it easy for them to adopt the perspectives from which these issues have been identified. Consequently, these groups also cannot immediately see how these issues connect to their own lived realities or the political issues they find most critical. For many feminists, for instance, clear-cut gender-political issues such as violence against women, the feminisation of poverty or the exploitation of women workers represent reasonable choices to engage with politically in scenarios that expressly address them. The fact that internet governance issues such as cyber crime, digital intellectual property rights and neoliberal ICT policies, respectively, may have a crucial bearing on each of these feminist issues is not immediately apparent, even though their influence might be quite decisive.

The problem of setting priorities for feminist advocacy needs to be understood in the context of a scarcity of resources that feminists can utilise. Scarce resources require a careful selection of the issues and political venues that we think are most pressing to engage in. In addition, abstracted internet governance issues in particular require substantial resources because a lot of feminist

academic groundwork is needed, both in terms of top-down projections of how certain decisions might impact different groups of women and men, as well as bottom-up analyses of good-practice examples and prognoses of which groups of women would require which kinds of internet governance policies to remedy which forms of discrimination against them.

Even under these adverse conditions, however, some feminists and their associations do find it worthwhile to engage in internet governance scenarios, and we will now turn to the strategies we employ and the limits and problems we encounter with them.

Demands for normative commitments

At the normative level, we lobby for a reaffirmation of non-discrimination, gender equality and women's empowerment as guiding principles. Concurrently, we seek a reaffirmation of the historical legacy of gender politics as such. We therefore lobby for the inclusion of references to the agreed conclusions of the world conferences on women and the outcomes of their review process, CEDAW, and any other relevant precedents. We also call for a reaffirmation of the strategy of gender mainstreaming, which, when successful, leads to the paradox of a policy document that demands gender mainstreaming while not having itself been indebted to it.

The strategy of reiteration and reaffirmation is chosen because feminists have so far not experienced any significant trickle-down effects of previously successful interventions. We have therefore not been able to directly build on the gains achieved in any previous forum and political process. Instead, we seem to have to engage in the same kinds of lobbying and advocacy in each new setting and process.

Demands for the collection of gender-disaggregated data

Gender mainstreaming requires the collection of gender-disaggregated data, and this is a crucial feminist demand because it constitutes the basis for any meaningful policy interventions. This demand is not only ideologically contentious from mainstream perspectives, because it makes injustices visible; it also involves a fight over budgets, because data collections require substantial monetary and labour resources. At issue here is the collection and analysis of rough demographic data as well as the creation of indicators that will lead to qualitative and quantitative data of sufficient quality and granularity.

Erasure of "bad" language

Political negotiations not only revolve around concepts but also around their wording. In certain contexts, it may be as important for feminists to achieve the erasure of specific concepts, phrases or conjunctions as it may be to achieve the inclusion of items. If successful, this can only be seen when examining the history of the negotiations, as, for instance, preserved in draft documents, while it cannot be gleaned from the text of the agreed conclusions. In gender politics, what many feminists seek to avoid at all costs is a conflation of women with other marginalised groups such as children, differently abled people, or people living in land-locked countries.

Engaging with mainstream, gender-blindly worded issue politics

Of course, we also seek to influence the negotiations around specific internet governance issues, such as those concerning internet censorship and digital surveillance, free and open source software (FOSS), or intellectual property rights. Given the absence of gender mainstreaming when these issues arrived on the political agenda, this means that gender analyses often have to be commissioned and conducted "on the fly", while the larger political deliberations are already in full swing. Concurrently, there is often not a lot of time left to develop a feminist consensus on the policy positions that should be developed accordingly. This is not only an analytic and intellectual problem, because it also leaves little room for strategic considerations, bargaining and coalition building.

Advocating special measures for girls and women

These analytic and strategic concerns also affect another crucial type of feminist policy input: the demands for special measures on behalf of girls and women. The rationale behind such demands is that unjust structures, institutions, practices and resource allocations that disadvantage many girls and women vis-à-vis many boys and men need to be fought by strengthening those that are discriminated against. However, in otherwise gender-blind political processes, all that can be achieved in this regard is that some of this feminist input is taken up selectively. The result can be problematic on account of the following issues.

The conflation of gender and women

The terms "gender" and "women" come to be used interchangeably. Women, because of their visibility as the marked gender, become stereotyped. Above all, they come to appear as a problem group that needs to be helped, which is a notion that is quite compatible with paternalistic frameworks. Concurrently, the male gender remains non-marked, non-gendered and hence retains its claim to universality. The groups of men who profit from the gender hierarchies that work to their advantage remain invisible, as do the gender hierarchies themselves.

The hijacking of feminist positions

Moreover, the selective uptake of only some measures for girls and women by mainstream political processes means that certain measures might in fact have become championed by constituencies who use them for ends other than gender equality and social justice. For instance, the paternalistic aim to protect women and children from digital pornography and cyber stalking is often voiced by constituencies who are in fact interested in installing far-reaching, society-wide internet censorship and surveillance regimes.

The selective uptake of feminist input

Often feminists are unable to insert special measures into the core areas of hegemonic power brokering. So, for instance, while a lot of knowledge has recently been developed in the area of women-friendly infrastructure development, including regulation and resource allocation, lobbying efforts regarding these issues have largely been in vain. Concurrently, the special measures that become part of the political consensus often constitute longstanding and more generalised feminist issues. For example, in many internet governance forums, the special measures that are most likely to be adopted refer to girls' education and women's professional training and employment. Even when positive on the face of it, this uptake might be seen as problematic in those internet governance negotiations that are strongly driven by transnational corporations and neoliberal market politics, emphasising the free reign of the private sector. Feminist analyses of economic globalisation have consistently pointed out that unbridled capitalism tends to severely exploit disadvantaged women in developing countries. As a result, special measures for girls' and women's education and training could function to mainstream the groups at issue more seamlessly into such exploitative setups.

Inappropriate contexts for gender mainstreaming

Concurrently, the limits of gender mainstreaming as a feminist strategy become obvious: gender mainstreaming can be employed in any context, including contexts that might be completely antithetical to social justice considerations. This at times might suit a small group of privileged liberal feminists, but it is untenable as a global feminist position. To put gender mainstreaming to good use, what is called for is not a compensatory approach within existing hierarchies, but a transformative one that combats these hierarchies.

Concluding thoughts

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.

At the same time, constant feminist input has possibly made it harder for hegemonic groups to pretend that talking about issues without any reference to groups of people and their highly divergent positions and needs is natural and should be sufficient. In fact, mainstream ICT policy makers are now faced with a newly consolidated field of expertise: the academic groundwork done by feminists has validated a gender-conscious approach to ICTs and has legitimated feminist involvement. Feminists have built and strengthened networks, have gained new capacities and skills for building caucuses and pressure groups in different political arenas, and have made a lot of information available to interested parties. We have achieved all of this on the fly, parallel to political negotiations that have been in progress, and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

But it might also be time to step back a little and reflect more strategically on the gains, losses and conundrums we have faced. To begin with, we need an ongoing analysis of the shifting power grid of internet governance forums. We need to understand where the decisions are made that are likely to have the strongest impact on different types of power relations and hierarchies, and who will likely get

empowered and disempowered by them. We need to discuss strategic lobbying and tactical feminism. This needs to encompass procedural issues such as successful agenda setting and the definition of political issues. But it also needs to encompass strategic gender approaches, including questions of how to make the male gender visible, curb the privileges associated with hegemonic masculinity, and engineer male gender roles towards feminist and social justice directions. A central issue will therefore be the one of how concerns for gender equality could be linked more systematically with other concerns for social justice, so that strong political alliances between feminists and non-feminists can be formed. After all, given the high likelihood of a continuation of far-reaching ICT-induced changes, the ferment and upheaval linked with these developments will persistently open hegemonic positions to challenge and in doing so will also favour ongoing feminist contestations. These opportunities need to be seized at all levels, because only "constant dripping wears away the stone." ■