

# Global Feminist Politics Concerning Media, ICTs: *Past Lessons and Present Challenges*

by Heike Jensen

*From the very first women's conference held by the United Nations more than 30 years ago,<sup>1</sup> media issues have played an important role in global feminist politics. With differing frameworks and shifting emphases, the three prime areas of concern up until recently have been (1) media content, (2) infrastructure and access to a diversity of media, and (3) education, training, jobs and decision-making in media organisations. In what follows, I would like to briefly outline how these issues have been addressed and met, and what new challenges have been created with the current development and spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs). My argument is that feminist politics have arrived at a crossroads where older concepts of the issues and of the political settings no longer seem to work and where new concepts have not yet developed to a useful degree. In particular, the roles and significance of the private sector need to be reappraised.*

**Looking back**, the political issues regarding media and ICTs that have successfully been brought to the agendas of the world conferences on women may be summarised as follows:<sup>2</sup>

***(1) Concerning media and ICT content, the recurring demands have been:***

- ◆ to abolish stereotyped depictions of men and women and pornography;
- ◆ to create positive, diverse and plentiful portrayals of women;
- ◆ to have a broad dissemination of information about women's rights; and
- ◆ to achieve a general orientation of the media and ICTs towards values such as peace, respect and non-discrimination.

***(2) Concerning infrastructure, the most pressing concerns have been:***

- ◆ to provide all women with access to the media and ICTs they wish to use; and
- ◆ to develop communications and information networks that benefit women.

***(3) And concerning education, training and career development, the prime issues have been:***

- ◆ to educate girls and women in the use of media and ICTs;
- ◆ to train more women in the mass communication and ICT sectors; and
- ◆ to bring women into decision-making positions in the respective business and governmental institutions.

If we try to assess how far these demands have been met, we arrive at a sobering view. In terms of content, the mass media have not become public resources or public service providers towards gender equality. Of course, there have been major shifts in the time span under consideration, most notably the collapse of the communist block and a transformation of many state-run mass media into privately run businesses. However, and not surprisingly, the profit motif has not worked to women's advantage in terms of content. This was clear from the outset, when feminist media

criticism across the different national setups of western, communist and southern nations and their respective media structures turned out to share many concerns.

The North's commercial media created unidirectional media flows to the South, which were experienced and criticised as neo-imperialist, potentially drowning out cultural and linguistic diversity and the local articulations of people in the South.<sup>3</sup> Such stereotyping and unidirectional media flows held a particular problem for women in the South, which related to international politics including development cooperation. In the history of the latter, a series of stereotypes of southern women have been generated and laboriously contested, from Women in Development (WID) to Women and Development (WAD) to Gender and Development (GAD). At issue in these approaches have been how women in the South have (stereotypically) been imagined and what roles and options they have been assigned or have been able to claim in the respective development schemes.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding commercial media, it is instructive to take note of the peculiar framing of "freedom of expression" that was introduced in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995. There, the term was used as a qualifier, in the sense that almost all calls for a revision of media content and new guidelines for content were framed as "to the extent consistent with freedom of expression".

Freedom of expression here worked as a shield against content or programming obligations that could potentially be imposed by states. While the concept obviously protected mass media institutions from being turned into mouthpieces of state propaganda, this context became a tool for them to block public service obligations and to override women's right to respectful representation. Even the existing public service obligations and multi-stakeholder regulatory bodies for private media, and multi-stakeholder regulatory bodies for public media have not profited women to a significant extent,

because women have been seen as just one more homogeneous and marginal interest group or stakeholder group among many.<sup>5</sup> Only the non-profit community media have demonstrated the utility of mass media for public services including gender-sensitive services, even though these media have been marginalised by commercial mass media and the agendas they set.

And what about ICTs, which do not operate along the lines of classic mass media amplifying the voices of the few (professional journalists and editors) to the many, but which bring the voices of the many (bloggers, twitterers, website operators) to the many? How have the feminist demands directed to ICTs fared? After all, these featured prominently on the global women's agenda in Beijing, being at length dealt with in Section J "Women and the Media" of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>6</sup>

While content may well be argued to be more diverse on the web than in the mass media, the anchoring of the operations in business arguably is not. The big platform and services providers (Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc.) may operate free of charge to the end users, but they are commercial enterprises that finance themselves like the mass media. They are in the business of helping their advertising clients identify potential customers. Classic mass media such as magazines have created – and heavily researched – their distinctive audience groups through their editorial content and have sold advertisers access to these groups in the pages of their magazines. "Selling audiences" has required thorough research into their demographic and social make up, done so that advertisers would know exactly who they would be able to reach through the media in question.

The big Web 2.0 providers do almost the same. They cultivate their audiences (of the advertisements) not through content but through platforms and functionalities. Since their platforms have – almost by definition – become sites where the audiences express themselves, their research consists more in the aggregation of the huge amounts of user data than in compiling

the data in the first place. The advertisement may take the mass mediated forms of banners or hyperlinks as well as the more personal form of emails. And often, advertisement messages are gender stereotyped in the ICT context in the same it is in mass media as they are largely generated by the same companies in both contexts.

While the user-generated content may be more diverse than that encountered in mass media, it is important to remember that there are still significant digital divides, leading to an unmistakable predominance of socio-economically privileged voices and their inevitable blind spots. So it would in effect be instructive to look more closely into the overlaps and the divergences between traditional mass media and Web 2.0 interactions, paying particular attention to consumption-based lifestyles. For instance, looking at girls and young women, it would be interesting to see whether the distinct mass media markets revolving around fashion, love and homemaking, and celebrities in any way relate to the content produced by their target groups on Web 2.0 platforms. A possible continuity could be the creation of community and a sense of belonging around consumption-based exchanges. A similar setup might be at work with respect to boys and young men in the area of technological leisure equipment. Again, many specialty magazines cater to these "geek" and "high end" technology user groups, and I would expect such communities to form in the online world as well.

Of course, much early research into ICTs and gender has stressed that gender swapping and other exploratory engagements with gender have been undertaken via ICTs.<sup>7</sup> But analogously, in the offline world, particular male readers may have favored magazines focused on royal families and specific female readers may have bought magazines on high-end stereo sound equipment, thus similarly subverting their gender roles through their reading and consumption habits.<sup>8</sup> My argument here is that it might be misleading to look at such practices without looking at the underlying business models that

## Harnessing Rural Women's Participation in ICT Growth and Globalisation in Kenya

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ICTs such as the mobile phone and Web 2.0; online tools such as email, blogs, podcasts, and social networking websites; as well as online videos have brought in new ways of communicating issues of human rights, empowerment and development to many people in Africa.

Yet as is common with new developments, there is an equally daunting rise in new threats to women's rights and pervasion of gender violence through such ICTs. This is especially relevant in terms of the internet, which is readily available and accessible through mobile phones- even in areas that were previously thought to be unreachable. Such threats include the prevalence of pornography and a rise in human trafficking, which target poor women from developing countries.

The gap between the users and beneficiaries of ICTs has widened at magnified rates and unless major and urgent interventions are sought, the effects will be detrimental to the development process and women's rights in Africa. Thus, there is a need to strengthen partnerships between government bodies, NGOs and the private sector at regional, national and local levels towards revisiting existing responses, as well as creating new initiatives that work towards empowering women.

A concrete example is how mobile technology has greatly contributed to women's participation in development. Mobile banking has enabled small-scale businesspersons in most rural areas to access bank procedures such as withdrawals, savings and even easier credit facilities, all from their mobile phones. This has enabled a population that was previously invisible to many banks to become one of the most sought after populations by micro-finance institutions. A good example of this is Mpesa. Mpesa is a mobile banking facility initiated by Saficom, a mobile operator in Kenya in partnership with Equity Bank, a local micro-finance bank. Mpesa enables users to make withdrawals and deposits from their mobile phones, an initiative that has helped many small-scale business in remote areas where there are no banking networks.

Another example is how mobile technology has harnessed women's participation in the electoral process in emerging democracies in the continent where they have often been marginalised and excluded. With mobile phone technology, civil society in many parts of Africa have actively trained women to send SMS text alerts on electoral malpractices and violence thereby actively engaging women as peace stewards. A good example of this is the Ushahidi platform that was used in Kenya's elections. The platform encouraged the use of text messages by civilians to send out alerts on cases of electoral violence to a central hub that mapped the geographical locations of the areas and specific incidents on their website to parties working on elections and post-elections monitoring. The Ushahidi platform was widely used by civil societies and international bodies to help monitor and curb further violence after Kenya's disputed General Election in December 2007. Moreover, NGOs working to help rape victims-survivors during the violence at the time used the platform to send out much needed medication and post trauma counselling to women in very remote rural areas of Kenya.

are still perpetuated by them. These models might, in the end, consolidate deep social injustices, including reactionary gender orders, even while lending themselves to subversions by the users on the surface.

Within the sphere of ICTs in general, and Web 2.0 in particular, it appears that an unprecedented global commercial dominance of a few companies has been created, which urgently needs to be addressed because it shifts the global political setups in the name of multistakeholderism, as we will see below.<sup>9</sup> This is not to argue that the use of ICTs and the internet may not have truly beneficial effects for

marginalised groups.<sup>10</sup> However, it cannot really be argued that social injustices within and across countries have lessened in the last 20 years, while during this time period ICTs have completely revolutionised global business patterns, from the underlying financial structures and markets to the processes of organising production, distribution and services. This has been an issue of infrastructure development as well as one of job markets, which I will address in turn.

Under the neoliberal conditions that have prevailed during the time period of the internet's growth and maturation, this development has been driven by businesses, or, at the most, by

public-private partnerships uniting businesses and governmental agencies. Again, in terms of the feminist demands outlined above, a public service approach to infrastructure development has not been completely absent but has definitely taken a back seat to economic considerations and preferences. Gender-sensitive goals, on the other hand, seem to have never seriously entered the many different spheres and venues that have evolved globally for ICT regulation, irrespective of the fact that varying mixtures of stakeholder groups have been involved in them.

For instance, the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has shaped and coordinated the internet's naming system and is also tasked with safeguarding the internet's security, stability and interoperability.<sup>11</sup> ICANN is dominated by the business constituency, with governments and civil society included in subordinated positions. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), on the other hand, is an intergovernmental organisation, with business in important support positions and civil society completely marginalised. The ITU is concerned with developing networks and services and with establishing the worldwide standards for the interconnection of communications systems.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) operates with a multi-stakeholder setup that aims to give representatives from governments, the private sector and civil society a similar footing. Its task is to promote dialogue about and enhance knowledge of internet policy issues.<sup>13</sup> So far, it seems that no matter the mix of stakeholder groups, gender justice and social justice have not primarily been pursued by any of these fora, even though the ITU and the IGF at least expressly reference their responsibility for development issues.

Possibly, the normalised, matter-of-fact inclusion of business entities does much to preclude such considerations, even though it needs to be stressed that neither the majority of governmental representatives nor of civil society representatives squarely champion gender justice approaches. In any case, more feminist research and strategising is urgently needed to

grapple with these new regulatory setups for internet governance. Gender advocacy in ICT policy, it needs to be noted, became a new focus of feminist intervention in the late 1990s. On the international plane, it was inaugurated in the context of the World Telecommunications Development Conference organised by the ITU in 1998.<sup>14</sup> It spread to different regulatory bodies and scenarios, including the ones just mentioned, but in my experience, it has rested on few women who have been thoroughly marginalised in these scenarios and who have, moreover, been so overtasked that they have not managed to break too much ground in theorising the issues and institutions.<sup>15</sup>

Similar gaps can be found with respect to prime regulatory issues that most nations are currently debating and acting on, most notably digital censorship and surveillance. Again, feminist voices need to be heard more in these contexts, which have not formed central points on the feminist agenda up until now. Regarding censorship, the only long-standing feminist debate is the one on pornography, while media-based surveillance has to my knowledge never been discussed in depth by feminist movements. Quite understandably, media-based censorship and surveillance may have taken a backseat in feminist deliberations because most women have encountered censorship and surveillance much closer to home and in a much more direct and unmediated way (i.e. perpetrated by their husbands, families and neighbors). At this point in time, when digital media make it increasingly possible to circumvent direct social censorship and surveillance, feminists need to intervene in the internet governance settings that have been engaged to a growing degree in building the infrastructure and the legal conditions for massive kinds of digital censorship and surveillance.

This is also a matter of women in jobs, careers and decision-making positions in this field, the last point of continuous feminist concern that I would like to mention. It has been well-documented that over the years of their evolution, ICT jobs have fallen within the predominant pattern of discrimination against

women in gainful employment, involving discrimination in terms of job choice and possibilities of entry, on-the-job treatment, retention and careers, remuneration and work-life balance, while the decision-making levels are dominated by men. The more the social and economic importance of ICTs grew, the clearer the segregation of women's and men's jobs in the respective industries became. This setup, true for the ICT core industries, also has been particularly visible in the transnational companies which have increasingly outsourced production, distribution and service components with the help of ICTs. Critical responses to these conditions of "globalisation" came not only from workers but also from consumers and service clients worldwide in attempts to use their choice as consumers politically by favoring employee-friendly companies.

From another angle, it needs to be stressed that of all the feminist demands voiced with respect to media and ICTs, the ones concerning education, training, jobs and careers are the ones that have most consistently been reiterated by policy makers. Nevertheless, within neoliberal frameworks, policy makers have mostly shied away from actually regulating commercial business environments along these lines. In terms of feminist demands, the demands for social justice and gender justice are equally important. If social justice is downplayed, it might lead to such a scenario that (the lucky few) privileged women and men have the equal chances of getting one of the good jobs, and (the unlucky many) discriminated women and men are equally likely to occupy a bad job. If gender justice and social justice work together, the goals would be to provide every woman and man with decent working conditions and to decrease the socioeconomic distances between good and bad jobs.

In sum, it seems that the fundamental tension at the root of the mass media that we found encapsulated in the struggle over freedom of expression remains unresolved and possibly even appears intensified – the tension between

media and ICTs as commercial enterprises on the one hand and media and ICTs as potential public resources and public infrastructure or public service providers on the other. If regulation forcing media and ICTs in the latter direction is absent, market and profit considerations will prevail over democratising, balancing and developmental concerns. Women have much to lose in this scenario.

Therefore, one strategy would be to direct political engagement with ICT regulation issues more clearly at transnational businesses themselves. Regarding content, this engagement needs to be undertaken from the point of view of both audiences and producers of content. It needs to grapple with the profit mechanisms pursued by the big commercial players such as Facebook and Google, and it may also require that internet users reflect their leisure habits and possibly alter them to bring companies in line with baseline requirements. With respect to employment and business structures, this engagement needs to be elaborated not only from the vantage point of workers, but also of owners and consumers, paying particular attention to the joint propagation of gender justice and social justice. Lastly, concerning the public sphere and its infrastructure, this engagement needs to be shaped by citizens, in the broadest sense of the term. At the same time, alternative business models need to be developed which hold the potential to create and safeguard a rich public domain.<sup>16</sup> But governments of course also need to be lobbied, as they set important standards in areas such as e-democracy and freedom of information, but also censorship and surveillance. While these tasks may appear daunting, leaving media and ICT regulation to the forces that be does not look like a promising alternative. ♦

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### **Endnotes:**

- 1 *The four world conferences on women up to date were held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995).*
- 2 *For an elaboration, please see my article “Women, Media and ICTs in UN Politics: Progress or Backlash?” in: Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues. Ed. Anita Gurumurthy, Parminder Jeet Singh, Anu Mundkur, Mridula Swamy. Bangkok, Thailand: UNDP-APDIP, New-Delhi, India: Elsevier, 2006. 3-14. Available at: <http://www.apdip.net/publications/ict4d/GenderIS.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2010).*
- 3 *These issues created a substantial controversy at UNESCO from 1975 to 1985 under the heading of the “New World Information and Communication Order”. The debate pitted developing countries primarily against the US, because the former wanted to curtail foreign media empires’ influx of information and entertainment and enable an articulation of their own cultural narratives and values. These issues have still not been resolved and more recently also entered into GATS and TRIPS negotiations.*
- 4 *See the anthology Feminism/Postmodernism/Development edited by Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart (London, New York: Routledge, 1995). See in particular the article by Geeta Chowdhry “Engendering Development? Women in Development (WID) in international development regimes”, pp. 26-41. See also Caroline Moser: Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training. New York, London: 1993. It is also useful to recall that representations of women function in complex ways, often additionally being made to stand for (the virtue of) “one’s own” country and (the shortcomings of) the “other” women and other countries.*
- 5 *A forceful testimony to the continued stereotyping and marginalization of women in the media around the world is provided by the Global Media Monitoring Project, which regularly compares the prominent news coverage on women and men. See [www.globalmediamonitoring.org](http://www.globalmediamonitoring.org).*
- 6 *See Sally Burch and Irene Leon: “Directions for Women’s Advocacy on ICT: Putting New Technologies on the Gender Agenda.” Networking for Change: The APCWNSP’s First 8 Years. Philippines: APCWNSP, 2000. 31-47: p. 36.*
- 7 *As an example, see Sherry Turkle (1997): Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Touchstone.*
- 8 *This is not to argue that on a personal level, such gender transgressions do not have their dynamics. See, for instance, Annalee Newitz and Charlie Anders (2006): She’s such a GEEK! Women Write about Science, Technology and Other Nerdy Stuff. Emeryville, CA: Seal.*
- 9 *As an aside, it may be remarked that such forms of business predominance could probably not even have been foreseen within the NWICO debate referred to above.*
- 10 *A crucial early example, followed by many others, was the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, in the mid-1990s, in which the leaders successfully used media strategies including the internet. See Jerry W. Knudson (1998): Rebellion in Chiapas: Insurrection by Internet and Public Relations. In: Media, Culture & Society 20:3. 507-518.*
- 11 *See its self-description at: <http://www.icann.org/en/about/> (accessed 22 September 2010).*
- 12 *For this and its other areas of action, go to: <http://www.itu.int/net/about/index.aspx> (accessed 22 September 2010).*
- 13 *<http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/aboutigf> (accessed 22 September 2010).*
- 14 *See Nancy Hafkin: “Gender Issues in ICT Policy in Developing Countries: An Overview.” UN 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 2002. (EGM/ICT/2002/EP.1, dated 25 October 2002), p. 3. Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/ict2002/reports/Paper-NHafkin.PDF>*
- 15 *Having researched these scenarios for the past eight years myself and also having been involved in feminist lobbying and advocacy in several of them, I include myself in this criticism. My point here is that we are still very far from having reached any critical mass and any sustained and vibrant theoretical and political debate in these places.*
- 16 *Constituencies that have begun such a task are the ones responding to the stifling aspects of intellectual property rights by creating alternative legal concepts such as Creative Commons or Copyleft. Also, a public goods approach to infrastructure development has been forwarded, in which the already privileged users pay a kind of tax with which further constituencies may be connected.*