

## **What We Talk About When We Talk About Gender**

### **Issue Paper: Dynamic Coalition on Gender and Internet Governance**

#### **Introduction**

What we talk about when we talk about gender. The title of this paper is a riff on the American author, Raymond Carver's landmark short story collection, 'What we talk about when we talk about love'<sup>i</sup>. It fits the gender and internet governance discourse well, simply because even 20 years after this discourse first emerged, there is still not enough clarity on what gender and internet governance is all about.

Is it about bringing more women's voices and perspectives into internet governance? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that). Is it about bringing more women online or bridging the gender gap in access to ICTs? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that). Is it about preventing gendered online abuse, harassment and violence? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that too).

In this paper, we'll go back to the future, 'between time past and time present',<sup>ii</sup> to outline the fundamentals of Gender and Internet Governance – and all that it must come to mean at this point of time, if it is, philosophically speaking, to mean anything at all.

#### **Background**

At the global level, gender and internet governance emerged as a key issue in the early 1990s, shortly after the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 recognised information and communication technologies (ICTs) as critical for achieving women's empowerment and gender equality and affirmed the need for women all over the world to have access to the internet. "Most women, especially in developing countries, are not able to access effectively the expanding electronic information highways," said the Beijing Platform for Action, which recommended empowering women "by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology."<sup>iii</sup>

The Platform for Action also pointed to the role of gender in governance. "More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy... Women therefore need to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of the new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact."<sup>iv</sup>

Gender balance was seen as a key instrument to involve women in decision-making. The Platform for Action recommended gender balance in the appointment of women and men to all advisory, management, regulatory or monitoring bodies, including those connected to the private and State or public media.<sup>v</sup>

What the Beijing Platform for Action affirmed in the sphere of women's rights was reaffirmed by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in the sphere of digital rights – eight years later. In 2003, the WSIS Declaration of Principles reinforced that the development of ICTs will provide opportunities for women's full and equal participation in all spheres of life.<sup>vi</sup>

In doing so, the Declaration explicitly mentioned the need for women to be "key actors in the Information Society," an indirect nod to the role of gender in internet governance. "We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes" notes the Declaration. "To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use

ICTs as a tool to that end.”<sup>vii</sup> The WSIS Plan of Action also explicitly mentioned the need to develop gender-specific indicators on ICT use.<sup>viii</sup>

In short, both these global summits affirmed the role of the internet as a critical global resource that enables women to exercise their right to speak, impart opinions, share ideas, build knowledge and access information.<sup>ix</sup> Women's access to the internet was seen as an 'enabler', enabling women to participate in the information economy, exercise citizenship rights, get access to health information and other services, form communities, and engage in formal and informal processes to determine their social, cultural and political life and more.<sup>x</sup>

Fast forward to this decade.

The internet has itself mutated massively since 1995, when the Beijing Platform of Action was drafted – it has grown in size and complexity, advanced in technology, plays an increasing role in everyday life, and exerts an enormous influence even where there is little access to the internet. In 1995, there were 16 million users of the internet; today, 3.6 billion people use the internet. Social media barely existed two decades back;<sup>xi</sup> today, social media is the mainstay of internet use, with 2.14 billion users.<sup>xii</sup>

As the digital world has become in complex, internet governance has advanced to deal with this complexity. However, the discourse on gender and internet governance has remained somewhat static. It still remains limited to the three recurring themes raised 20 years back:

- achieving gender parity in internet governance
- enabling women's access to the internet
- preventing online harassment and violence that women face

Does this paradigm meet the myriad hopes, needs, aspirations, realities and expectations of not just women, but different genders across the spectrum? Is this agenda sufficient to ensure that all genders will get not just access to the internet, but a measure of digital citizenship once they are online? What more is needed to achieve digital citizenship across genders? This is what the next section investigates.

## **An updated agenda for gender and internet governance**

This section will be updated in the next draft to include a comprehensive agenda for gender and internet governance that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

### *Principles*

Defining gender: Internet governance for whom? Whose perspectives matter? Gender will be defined to go beyond women to other genders.

Defining intersectionality: Is gender enough? How do other markers of identity – class, caste, religion, race etc intersect with gender? Whose voices and perspectives are foregrounded in internet governance and whose are missing, absent, lost or discounted?

### *Issues*

The [Feminist Principles of the Internet](#) will serve as the basis for this section.

How does gender intersect with internet use? These will be explored and examined.

Examples illustrating these issues from various countries and contexts will be presented.

### *Action points*

Ten key priorities for strengthening GIG will be identified and presented in the next draft.

- i Carver, Raymond. 1981. What we talk about when we talk about love: stories. New York: Knopf.
- ii This landmark phrase is taken from TS Eliot's poem, Four Quartets
- iii Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p 155, United Nations, 1995
- iv Ibid, p 155-156
- v Ibid, p 156
- vi APC and HIVOS. Global Information Society Watch 2013: Women's rights, gender and ICTs, preface
- vii World Summit on the Information Society, WSIS Declaration of Principles, 12 December 2003
- viii World Summit on the Information Society, WSIS Plan of Action, 12 December 2003
- ix APC and HIVOS, preface
- x APC and HIVOS, preface
- xi Facebook launched in 2004, just one year before the Beijing Conference in 2005
- xii <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>