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Nepal IGF 2018: Revisiting the experience

We have seen two national Internet Governance Forums (IGFs) in Nepal, in 2017 and 2018. During Nepal IGF 2018, around 150 people were gathered from different sectors, including people from public offices, lawyers, techies, civil society groups and students, out of which approximately one fourth or less were female and queer people. The event lasted two days, with a couple of plenary sessions and two consecutive parallel sessions, and was held in a hotel in Kathmandu. The forum included a total of 15 sessions out of which three were moderated by women and two were specifically focused on women and queer people. Below is a group conversation facilitated by Shubha Kayastha among six women and queer participants who had participated in Nepal IGF 2018 to collate their experiences and reflections through face-to-face interaction and email conversations. Although the discussion was carried out more than six months after the forum, the conversation below captures the essence of how each of them understood and experienced being in the forum, along with some suggestions and recommendations. Below, you will hear views from Dikchya Raut (bureau chief, Nepali24hours.24), Pushpa Joshi (former staff, LOOM), Rita Baramu (programme manager, Body & Data), Salina Chapagain (law student), Shiwa Karmacharya (former Internet and Sexuality Unit team leader, LOOM) and Shubha Kayastha (co-founder and executive director, Body & Data).

If you have to explain to someone what the IGF is, how would you do it, especially if they are a newcomer to this area of work?

Pushpa: The IGF is a space where different stakeholders related to the internet come together to talk about innovation, tech-based solutions and pursue networking.

Shiwa: It is a multistakeholders' platform which includes people from technical and non-technical groups to share and exchange information about their respective areas of work so as to come up with a new kind of programme or solution to problems related to the internet for the betterment of society, including policy-level discussions.

Salina: The IGF is the forum where all the stakeholders related to the internet come together to discuss issues relating to the internet, maximise internet opportunities, and addresses challenges and risks that arise. It provides an opportunity to the private sector as well to input on policy formation.

How did you find the IGF as a first-time goer in 2018?

Rita: It was a very new issue for me, so it was difficult to grasp everything that was going on. I didn't know such a conference happens in Nepal. To be honest, I found it quite formal.

Shiwa: As someone who has been to the national IGF twice, I feel it is more like a gathering of a selected group of people who are already familiar to one another.

Salina: Simultaneous sessions on various different topics made it difficult to catch up with everything. However, it was a good learning experience. It also gave me an opportunity to get acquainted with people working in diverse areas related to the internet.

Dikchya: The IGF in 2017 was quite fruitful for me as I got familiar with new people in important positions around internet-related businesses, thus it was a good networking opportunity. However, in 2018, when I saw the gathering of the same people with similar approaches and beliefs on their take on internet issues, I was quite disappointed.

What was missing? What would have made it comfortable and safe, as you said it is quite formal?

Pushpa: It would have been nice if the setting and discussion were informal. In addition, the sessions are always repetitive, and intersectionality is missing in the sessions. Like for example: sessions such as “how are sex workers using the internet” bring intersectionality between two movements.

Rita: Now when I reflect, I feel like there was lack of diversity. Everyone looked corporate and formal. Most people were even dressed in black! There were very few women. I didn’t feel like [it was] the space for discussion around human rights advocacy.

Shiwa: I moderated a session on “Using internet for empowerment” where we discussed women’s access to technology, use of the internet for movement building and for accessing information. I was a speaker in another session about the participation of youths in internet governance spaces.

Shubha: I was trying to attend technical sessions because I wanted to learn, however those sessions were quite technical and I could not relate it to my work. There was also limited space to get clarification.

Pushpa: They use a lot of jargon in the sessions, the moderators needs to simplify the terminologies for non-techies.

Dikchya: Since I knew people in in the forum, it was easier for me to get around people, but I imagine how a newcomer in the space might have felt, as seeing people “trying to look important all the time” might be overwhelming the first time. I wish there was an orientation for the newcomers to explain internet governance process, that would have been better. Honestly, it would have been helpful to lessen the pressure of “having to pretend to know important stuff”.

Shubha: I felt distant from most of the crowd there and found it difficult to assimilate because of the limited number of activists at the forum, and we didn’t feel welcomed in that space. Despite understanding the importance of networking, the environment wasn’t favourable or comfortable.

Salina: The participation of women was very low, and this kind of forum should encourage more participation of women. In a country with a patriarchal society like ours, the impacts that the internet has upon women are more severe, thus the voice and opinions of women are to be heard compulsorily, which the organisers seem to have missed out.

What were your roles during the IGF 2018?

Dikchya: In the IGF 2017, I was a moderator in the session on “Grassroots level initiative in Nepal” that witnessed youth in the panel. Since I was member of the multistakeholders group (MSG) and programme committee, I provided inputs during the meetings and managed sponsorship proposals. In the IGF 2018, I was again a moderator in a workshop, “Importance of participating in local, regional and national IGFs”, which brought together youth involved in internet governance forums at the global and national level.

Shiwa: In the Nepal IGF 2017, it was even difficult for our session to get accepted when we wanted to share findings from research on women and ICTs in Nepal by LOOM. We were told that the IGF is not a platform to share research outcomes by a few in the MSG. I think it is because of the reluctance to have issues related to sexuality in such spaces. In the Nepal IGF 2018, I was a youth representative in the programme committee, it was difficult for me to negotiate at many levels. We had proposed a Youth IGF, but most of our voices were ignored despite having a few supporters in the committee. Ultimately the Youth IGF did not happen. I had also proposed fundraising for the Youth IGF, as we were shown lack of funding being a reason, but my proposal was completely ignored. Being part of the programme committee, it sometimes felt we, as youths or as women, were being tokenised and our ideas were not implemented.

Shubha: As a member of the hosting committee, I was supposed to support logistical activities, but I wanted to input more into the programme. So I drafted a code of conduct and got it approved by the hosting committee and programme committee which was shared during the forum. I facilitated an interactive workshop on “How can we make internet governance friendly to women and LGBTIQ individuals?”.

Pushpa: I was mostly a participant in both the national IGFs.

Salina: Since I represented one of the organisers, I was involved in rapporteur work, and later contributed to the initial drafting of the report of Nepal IGF 2018.

What did you like about the IGF?

Salina: The concept of this platform itself is fascinating to me. The ideas and opinions from multiple sectors are brought together in a common forum, thus, we get to understand diverse perspectives.

Shiwa: Compared to 2017, there were more women in Nepal IGF 2018 as participants as well as in organising committees. And the realisation that women's rights groups should be part of internet freedom conversations seemed to have increased.

Rita: More than specific sessions, to have such an event where different aspects of the internet are discussed in one space is something very important. And incorporation of issues of marginalised groups such as women, youth and the disabled, though as tokenism, is something appreciable, though I am sure there has been a lot of background work that must have gone into it.

Shubha: I felt that the sessions by Body & Data made people very curious. As we had the word "queer" mentioned in the title and we started the presentation with terminology related to queerness, people did listen carefully. It felt like intervening in a new space that is not a usual feminist space that we normally go to.

Shiwa: I felt the same last year, I felt rebellious to be in a different space talking about our issues (gender and sexuality).

Pushpa: I liked the session on youth and the IGF in 2017. I also liked how there were many young people.

Dikchya: I like the fact that I am able to interact with especially representatives of the government sector and get updates from their work in progress. I feel that it makes them accountable to the common people and also makes them incorporate in their policies the feedbacks which are inclusive of the perspectives from other sectors as well.

Why do we still need to engage despite all the challenges?

Pushpa: To make the internet friendly to women, queer people, those with disabilities, etc., their voices need to be incorporated. And in platforms like the IGF, such voices could be missed, thus we need to go.

Rita: Yes, yes, we definitely need to engage so that our perspective on various issues around digital rights is not missed out. So even if the space might not feel inclusive and conducive for us, we need to continuously intervene. In addition, as civil society actors, we have our own agenda towards governments as well as the corporations, and the IGF provides an opportunity to advocate our issues with both the sectors.

Dikchya: Giving up is not a solution, rather working on the challenges will make things better for good. We should keep going in order to make the forum inclusive of women, youth and other minority communities. The IGF is a new concept all around the world, and I feel personally responsible to make it familiar to more of us, as I see the relevance and importance of this forum at the present day and time.

Shiwa: The internet is not only used by those who make it. So going to places to tell people who build technology and develop programmes about its impact among different groups is very important.

Shubha: As the IGF is a multistakeholder process, and it is different to UN processes, thus it becomes imperative for different stakeholders to engage and be part of the discourse. We also need to reflect on who within civil society is getting to participate. Civil society groups working with marginalised communities should get space in such platforms to raise the issue that concerns them.

Salina: Being an end-user or representing certain gender group or academic groups, we should actively participate in such forums, and voices from our respective sectors are to be raised.

What could be done to make the space more open and inclusive?

Dikchya: To promote the forum, it should be advertised in newspapers and social media along with articles and news. Ensuring funding to bring people living in under-representative districts will make the programme inclusive, or these forums could be taken to them. A webinar/online course a week ahead of the forum might also be a smart idea. We need to reach more allies.

Pushpa: Also the event application should be shared widely along with the clear objectives and how could it be useful for people from different communities. The application form should be in both Nepali and English language. There is no follow-up, output to be shared and its impact on policy change and advocacy.

Shubha: If the call for applications also clearly mentions different stakeholders who can be part of such processes, the space will be more diverse than the usual suspects. I did not see many techie women either, the representatives from tech companies were mostly men, women's participation was not pushed much. There have to be sessions around digital rights, linking information technology innovation and human rights, which were missing.

Salina: Some sessions should be allocated for marginalised peoples and issues that are usually left out in such forums, for example, for women-related issues, legal issues and such.

Shiwa: The internet governance spaces have to be widened to more people across different fields of work, which doesn't seem to be of interest to the organiser at the moment.

Rita: The IGF is a big event so there could be some kind of advocacy that could be taken forward after it, which could be related to the policies against internet freedom and digital rights.

Shubha: For most of us, our first experience with internet governance spaces was confusing and full of questions, so to make it easier for newcomers, some sessions around what the IGF is and its mechanisms could be included. Probably, a youth IGF and women's IGF are other ways to incorporate the agendas of various groups.

Shiwa: The sessions could be more qualitative as there were not many applications that were submitted.

Salina: Providing handouts from the sessions will also be useful. Further, the simultaneous sessions confuse the participants, having to choose, to decide on one out of many. The forum should encourage more discussions from the audience.

What do you think about the physical space?

Shiwa: If the forum was organised in a university space or some bigger space, it would be better, so that a number of parallel sessions could be organised.

Shubha: It would be good to have display tables and booths for people to present their work, including technology innovation, creative work, etc. There was no space to rest and for networking at the last Nepal IGF. The space could be more colourful and vibrant.

Rita: The IGF was organised in a three-star hotel which makes it less welcoming at least for me, it creates a rigid culture. If it were done in a less fancy space, it would be a less corporate space.

Dikchya: I liked the place, because they had technologies that a forum like the IGF needs. Simple things like working mikes, lighting, a sound system and the on-site translation systems are a challenge in almost all the programmes organised in Nepal. At least that was handled well.

The conversation was wrapped up with bowls of momos (Nepali dumplings).

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Revision #1
Created 25 July 2023 05:23:36 by Kira
Updated 25 July 2023 05:26:42 by Kira