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Nine reasons why we need more feminists in internet governance

By Sachini Perera

As someone who is always excited by the prospect of influencing policy making (yes I'm a policy geek who has accepted this identity), I have for the last few years been trying to encourage other feminists and queers to get involved in internet governance in our countries, regions and globally. It is not always easy to make the case for why internet governance is a feminist issue (only because there are so many interconnected reasons and it can sometimes turn into a confusing ramble), so I decided to make this listicle that will help articulate it better.

1. The struggle

> If the internet is a continuum of the public space, then our collective struggle exists here too.

While meaningful access to the internet continues to be affected by various factors such as gender, income, education, age, geographical location, class, etc., it is evident that the line between online and offline is increasingly blurring. The internet is a space for expression, exploration, play, activism and community building, especially for those who are marginalised, discriminated against

and disenfranchised in society. We also see the same structural inequalities and challenges we fight on-ground manifesting on the internet in various ways and sometimes being amplified. Therefore, it is no longer possible to clearly demarcate where our struggle happens and dismantling capitalist patriarchy must include the internet. And if the internet is part of the commons, then feminist politics of reclaiming and defending the commons must be extended to the internet. One of the ways we can actively ensure this is by engaging with internet governance.

Geek out:

- https://www.awid.org/reclaiming-commons
- http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/feminism-and-politics-commons
- http://gutsmagazine.ca/feminism-and-the-commons/

2. Early adopters

> Feminists are not new to the internet and the internet is not new to feminists.

Feminists and queers have always been interested in exploring the internet, playing with it, critiquing it, building and challenging theories on it, and remaking it. From Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto to CyberFeminism of the early 1990s that emerged simultaneously but separately from the UK’s Sadie Plant and Australia's VNS Matrix's “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century”, feminists have been engaging with the internet and information and communications technologies (ICTs). The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 recognised ICTs as critical for achieving gender equality, as reflected in Section J of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). It is in fact one of the first consensus human rights documents by UN member states to mention ICTs. Feminists and queers have always been on the internet and we must continue to be a leading voice in internet governance.

Geek out:

- https://www.apc.org/en/node/34116/

- https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4x37gb/we-are-the-future-cunt-cyberfeminism-in-the-90s
- https://study.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/Ch17_Cyberfeminism.pdf

3. More than numbers and protocols

> Internet governance is about many areas of policy, not just domain names and IP addresses.

One of the common misconceptions about engaging with internet governance is that it is just heavily technical discussions full of jargon. This is not entirely untrue. Names, numbers and protocols used to be the main focus of internet governance, with academics and technologists leading the way, and as the internet became commercialised, these became contentious issues that led to the formation of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). However, internet governance has since evolved into what UNESCO defines as “the complementary development and application by governments, the private sector, civil society and the technical community, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and activities that shape the evolution and use of the Internet,” and it is critical that feminist perspectives, analysis and praxis are brought into this. This is not to say that feminists are not engaging with the numbers and protocols or that we should not. Becoming a member of Internet Society is one great way to strengthen our capacities, as is attending schools of internet governance that happen prior to Internet Governance Forums in our countries.

Geek out:

- https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/governance
- https://www.internetsociety.org/learning/
- https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/dynamic-coalition-on-schools-of-internet-governance-dc-sig

4. Corporate and state capture

> Internet governance is by all of us, for all of us.

While national-level policy making has an impact on how the internet is used and shaped, it is undeniable that governing the internet cannot be business as usual due to the dynamic nature of the internet. Extraterritoriality and transnational cooperation are essential, as is the participation of all those who have a stake in using the internet in free, rights-based, affirmative and pleasurable ways. Essentially, all of us. However, the internet has not been immune to the impact of neoliberal economic policies and the corporate capture of states, public institutions and decision makers, with private companies and states taking up more space in internet governance. And “governance” gives immediate connotations of states, governments, laws, hierarchies, etc. which give the indication that there is no place for people in these processes. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which is the key policy dialogue forum on internet governance, actively challenges such hegemony through the core principles of the IGF: open and transparent, inclusive, bottom-up, non-commercial and multistakeholder. While the effectiveness of these principles in practice can be varied, the bottom line is that internet governance spaces and processes are open to all.

Geek out:

- https://www.genderit.org/articles/who-governs-internet
- https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2011/09/global-principles-in-internet-governance/
- https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/%E2%80%98governing%E2%80%99-my-internet

5. Solidarity

> Feminists are already engaging with internet governance but we need more of us.

Burnout is real, including in activism. And work in policy spaces can often feel very lonely and disengaged from ground realities. This can be especially true for feminists who are already active in internet governance spaces. Often it feels like the same group of people with the occasional new face once in a while, and this is why we need more feminists, especially from the global South and

developing countries, to engage with internet governance. Policy advocacy is not everyone's cup of tea and many feminists are rightfully sceptical about the value of policy spaces. However, there are a couple of things we can do to show our solidarity: identifying and supporting feminist and queer activists who have an interest in policy to join internet governance processes, following and contributing to IGF discussions remotely, and disrupting the monotony of policy dialogue by introducing exciting topics and methodologies, to name a few. It is also important to note that increasing breakdowns in multilateralism mean we need different avenues to have nuanced and multistakeholder policy dialogue. IGFs, where there is no negotiated policy document or decisions, is such a space that we could consider engaging in.

Geek out:

- https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/trials-confused-feminist-internet-governance-school
- https://www.giswatch.org/institutional-overview/womens-rights-gender/whose-internet-it-anyway-shaping-internet-feminist-voice
- https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/what-do-women%E2%80%99s-rights-have-do-sdgs-and-internet

6. Feminists at IGFs

> Let's occupy our national, regional and global IGFs.

From red tape to resources, usually there are many challenges in accessing policy spaces. It can be very frustrating and it often feels like it is unworthy of the labour and effort. The core principles of IGFs have managed to remove some of those obstacles and IGFs are fairly easy to access, especially at national level. For an example, in Sri Lanka all I had to do to participate in and speak at the national IGF in 2017 was to reach out to the organisers (the Internet Society of Sri Lanka) and share my interest. While the experience in other countries might be different, on principle IGFs are meant to be open to anyone with an interest in internet governance, and this is something we can leverage. While regional and global IGFs are not as accessible due to travel costs, there is limited funding support provided for activists. The Asia Pacific Regional IGF (AprIGF), for example, tries to prioritise women in its fellowship programme, though still from very much a gender binary

approach. The global IGF, depending on the host country, will provide limited travel support to attend the forum. It is also important for donors who support feminist initiatives to recognise IGFs as a potential advocacy space for feminists and introduce funding opportunities accordingly. Some other ways to occupy IGFs are to engage with them remotely, apply to join the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) of the IGF, and provide input to the priorities of the IGFs each year.

Geek out:

- http://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/3568/480
- https://www.aprigf.asia/remote-participation.html
- http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/dynamic-coalitions/77-gender-and-ig

7. Feminist feedback loop

> Bridging the gap between internet governance and ICT policy making.

While we see increasingly robust and dynamic discussions in internet governance spaces, especially through a feminist, queer and sexual rights framework, the nuances of these discussions often don't find their way to national policy making on ICTs. One topical example can be found in TikTok. It is currently the fastest growing social media app for short-form mobile videos and is experiencing a surge of popularity worldwide. It is a platform which is primarily focused on pleasure for the sake of pleasure (while of course making profit for the parent company). And policy makers don't know what to do with a platform like that, as shown by the recent ban on it in India, which was reversed almost immediately. This disconnect is also evident in policy responses to technology-related violence, and not just by states but also by the advocacy asks of some rights groups that are focused on demanding new laws rather than approaching the issue holistically and addressing the structural causes. So an important reason why we need more feminists in internet governance is to create a feminist feedback loop between feminist internet discourse and national-level policy advocacy. Such a feedback loop is also important in order to ensure that local and national priorities are reflected in the regional and global IGFs and that the learnings and outcomes from those spaces are brought back to our communities. We can also ensure that internet governance conversations are transmitted to human rights advocacy spaces we are active in and

vice versa, so that there is more cohesion.

Geek out:

- https://www.worldpulse.com/community/users/marietta64/posts/8946

8. Intersectionality

> "My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit." - Flavia Dzodan

The more feminists and queers we have in internet governance, the stronger the intersectional analysis of all things pertaining to internet governance will be. Of course, this also impinges on how well we exercise our feminist accountability practices to ensure that people with varying degrees of privilege are able to access these spaces and not the same group of people. This module on internet governance will be one way of ensuring that more people, especially feminists and queer people, feel better equipped to access, occupy and influence internet governance processes. Another is to localise and/or make our own feminist principles of the internet that make it easier to see the links between our work and priorities, and internet governance issues.

Geek out:

- https://feministinternet.org/en/principles
- http://resurj.org/post/our-feminist-accountability-practice

9. Cross-movement building

> Connecting the dots, breaking the silos.

The final point brings us back to the very first point. If the internet is a continuum of the public space, then our collective struggle is also here. Therefore, it is essential that feminists and queers

who are active in various movements are making links and working strategically and in solidarity. This applies to those engaged in internet governance as well. Almost every feminist priority makes an appearance in internet governance discussions: sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTIQ rights, freedom of expression, education, work and labour, corporate accountability, privacy and surveillance, etc. And in return, ICTs and the internet are increasingly coming up in all these priority areas. So there's a strong case to be made for more feminists, regardless of their area of focus, interest or expertise, to engage with internet governance. This is also critical towards more feminist knowledge creation.

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