

Women, War and the Media

Women's Online Activism and the Gender Digital Divide

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Abstract

The virtual world offers radically new settings for women's communications as well as their empowerment. However, it is not merely women's access to technology and/or digital skills that count. The circumstances in which women are able to make use of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are equally, if not more, important. While examining the socio-cultural factors contributing to gender-based "digital divide" and gender-biased aspects of the ICTs among Arab and Afghan women, this paper shows that the ICTs have not generated radically new social, economic and political opportunities for women in any substantial manner. On the contrary, they replicate patterns of segregation seen elsewhere in the society. However, Internet is potentially instrumental in countering the patriarchal and stereotypical depiction of Arab and Afghan women internationally. In fact, in certain contexts, global connectivity offered by Internet help(ed) amplify women causes. While in the case of Arab women I will count on the existing research on Arab media especially during the Arab Spring, in the Afghan case, I anchor this paper in my personal research and experience since there is scant academic research on ICTs in the context of Afghanistan.

Introduction

The Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)¹ appear to have become a tool to transform socio-economic and political life globally. Chrisanthi Avgerou and Geoff Walsham (2000) go as far to assert that the ICTs have the potential to help improve the social conditions across the world.

The optimists see the ICTs as the engine that would transform "industrial age" even in developing world into an "information age," revolutionising economy, society, and polity

¹ According to OECD (2002), ICTs are 'the means of generating, processing, transporting and presenting information'.

(Wilhelm 2000: 138-61)². The pessimists point out a “digital divide” between Internet haves and have-nots (Loader 1998; Ebo 1998:1-12). There is also a gender-based digital divide. The phenomenon embracing the disparities in access and use of ICTs by women and men is called the “gender digital divide” (Huyer and Mitter: 2003). However, there is a third position argued by, for instance, Steve Cisler (2000). This third perspective rejects a binary division between information haves and have-nots but it argues for a categorisation based on different degrees of access to ICTs.

For instance, while presently living in Sweden I myself have uninterrupted access to Internet. I had restricted access to Internet — mainly by way of Internet cafes — while in Islamabad, capital city of Pakistan, where I spent years of underground life. However, as an activist living in refugee camps on Pak-Afghan border region, information gathered through Internet by fellow activists — mainly men — would reach me by word of mouth or print outs. I subscribe to the third perspective.

In this gradation of access, women groups, particularly in the countries of global South, are most likely to be counted among ICT ‘have nots’. While poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy, language barriers are the chief factors impeding a generalised access to the ICT-infrastructure, however, as Natasha Primo (2003) asserts, women’s access to the ICTs is hindered by factors that go beyond issues of technological infrastructure and socio-economic environment.

The gender roles shaped as a result of cultural and social constraints in different societies limit the capacity of women to participate on equal terms with men in the Information Society. This owes to the fact that access to ICTs is embedded in a complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human, and social resources and relationships. Likewise, content and language, literacy and education, and community and institutional structures must all be taken into account if meaningful access to new technologies is to be provided.

The gender-divide assumes an extra-acute form in such conflict-ridden countries as Afghanistan. Held back by three-decade-long civil strife, Afghanistan is crawling on the information superhighway as only pockets of access to communication lines exist in urban

² For instance Moolman *et al* (2007) also claim, ‘ICTs and the internet offer vast, new and unprecedented opportunities for human development and empowerment in areas ranging from education and the environment to healthcare and business’

centres whereby large swathes of the country lag behind even its developing neighbours.

The case of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries is hardly different. Despite considerable achievements by women in terms of participation in the idiomatic public sphere, the public sphere remains ‘the self-acclaimed space of male absolute power and dominance until relatively recently’ because ‘the male-dominated politico-religious centers of power in Muslim societies remain ambivalent in their positions toward the scope of women’s mobility as well their visibility’ (Skalli, 2006). Still, to whatever extent ICTs are available in a country, they provide women with an outlet to reach out local communities as well as the wider world (Harcourt, 2001:299-322).

For instance, in MENA countries, technology is helping women get around mechanisms of censorship, amplifying women voices and presence at the regional and inter/national levels, and encouraging women to forge new alliances (Skalli, 2006).

Contextualising digital gender divide

While recognising the potential of the ICTs as a tool that could empower women (Hafkin and Huyer, 2006) including women with disadvantaged economic background (Hafkin and Taggart, 2002: 93), I argue that mere the existence of ICTs cannot offer the disadvantaged sections any considerable upward mobility. It has been argued that “information” alone does not solve the economic and social problems of poverty (Blanco, 2003). Even importantly, a “gender divide” restricts women’s access to, use of, and potential benefits from ICTs.

In fact, unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICTs may exacerbate existing gender-based inequalities (Sandys, 2005).

On the one hand, Internet is mainly a male privilege, particularly wealthier male, (Kensinger, 2003), on the other, mere the fact that two-thirds of the world's illiterate are women (Eisenstein, 1998: 163) tilts the balance in the favour of men. It has also been highlighted that the ICTs are designed and created within male dominated environments without considering women-specific needs. Likewise, the ICTs are regulated by men-as-decision-makers (Huyer and Mitter, 2003).

It can also be argued that like any other technology, they are socially constructed and impact

men and women differently (Hafkin,2002). For instance, ICTs have contributed to violence against women in societies and sections of societies where women are subjected to violence more arbitrarily.

For instance, not only the use of spy software, electronic snooping on private conversations, email tampering, webcams and visual surveillance as well as online harassment and cyberstalking has been highlighted, the role of ICTs in the international and domestic trafficking of women, and trade in pornographic images of women (Moolman *et al* 2007, Maltzahan 2006) has also been documented.

Arab Spring: Revolution tweeting women?

According to Loubnah Skalli (2006), ‘Access and use of the Internet in the MENA are clearly defined by gender, age, class, and regional differences’. Constraints that restrict the Arab woman’s access to Internet are familiar: the cost of a computer/connection, low computer literacy, language barriers, exclusionary patriarchal ideologies, etc (Al-Zu’bi cited in Skalli, 2006). It was in this context that the apocryphal Arab Spring began to unfold by early 2011.

Many mystified observers and activists in the Arab World itself and beyond attributed the advent of Spring to Facebook and other networking sites available online. The BBC, for instance, claimed: “Facebook Changed the World” (cited in Storck, 2011). Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim famously said, “If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet.” (*ibid*). *New York Times*’ columnist Nicholas Kristof labeled the “quintessential 21st-century conflict,” in which “on one side are government thugs firing bullets...[and] on the other side are young protesters firing ‘tweets’” (*ibid*).

However, such analysts as London-based Lebanese scholar Gilbert Achcar (2014) and Malcolm Gladwell (2010) view such valorizations of media as problematic. Gilbert (2014) considers the epitaph of “Facebook Revolution” as ‘an exaggeration’ but ‘not one without a grain of truth’ and Gladwell (2010) has pointed out that ‘revolutions have been taking place for centuries before Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook’.

Sticking by the latter position, I argue that media are mere facilitators and important tools in any social upheaval. However, assigning elementary agency and centrality in a process of

change to media is highly flawed. For instance, Bashar-ul Assad regime could not be Facebooked. Despite all the social networking sites, the Egyptian military has staged a comeback. The so-called Islamic State (IS) has not been tweeted away. However, the only instance whereby IS was successfully resisted involved an armed resistance by Kurdish fighters, many of them women.

While Arab women joined the Spring to fight for democratic reform (Newsom and Lengel, 2012), and the world came to know many inspiring instances of courageous struggle by women activists. However, access to the public sphere does not necessarily translate into gender equality and the agency inherent in social media may not translate offline (Skalli, 2006; Newsom and Lengel 2012). I believe the Arab women are themselves the best analysts to evaluate the gains and losses of the Arab Spring. I want to share my Afghan experience to argue that ICTs in themselves are neither liberating nor oppressive. Women access and use of ICTs will correspond to the degree of freedoms achieved by women.

Afghanistan and the Internet

While most literature seems to approach the Middle East region in general (Alterman:2000; Fandy:2000; Dutta & Coury 2003:116-31), there is very little academic research on ICTs in particular the Internet use in Afghanistan. It is, therefore, important to know what are the socio-cultural factors contributing to the “digital gender divide” or gender biased ICTs in Afghanistan, especially in the rural parts.

Have the ICTs generated new social, economic and political opportunities for women or do they replicate patterns of segregation seen elsewhere in the society? These are some of the questions I endeavour to explore in this section.

Estimates of Internet usage in Afghanistan like other under developing countries are difficult to determine as Meier (2000) notes that “data for poor regions are the least precise, or often [are] politically unavailable.”

There were no Internet users in Afghanistan until 9/11. Waheed Mozhdha (BBC Persian,2009) who once was working in the foreign ministry of Taliban maintains that during the Taliban period, only the titular head of Taliban regime Mullah Omar, Foreign Minister Mullah

Matawaker Ahmad, and few others had the permission to access Internet. At the turn of millennium, Internet arrived Afghanistan. The following facts and figures mirror the use of the Internet in Afghanistan:

The telecommunication services in the country are provided by Afghan Wireless, Etisalat, TS2 Satellite Technologies, Roshan, Areeba and Afghan Telecom. But policies and regulation are made by Afghanistan Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. In 2003, the Ministry presented its Internet policy with a vision to enable Afghanistan becoming part of the global information society while preserving Afghanistan's cultural heritage, but with a scant mention of the needs of Afghan women.

Authorities' initial concern over the Internet, like rest of the Muslim world, was over what is considered 'culturally inappropriate' content (Anderson,1999). The Afghan government also invokes family values, Islam or culture to ban certain websites. But these are different pretexts to devoid Afghan people of an exposure to certain ideas and information. The *Kabul Press*, a news website for instance, has been repeatedly banned or denied access.

In 2006, the Afghan Ministry of Communications and Information Technology signed a US\$64.5 million agreement with ZTE Corporation for the establishment of a countrywide fibre optic cable network. However, at present, if we apply the general rule of access to Internet, i.e., computers with Valid IP addresses, while the Internet reaches over 50 percent of the population in Iran, only 5 percent of the Afghan population—primarily university students and social elites—has any access to the Internet. There are 384,220 Facebook subscribers as of December 31,2012, with 1.2 penetration rate (Facebook, 2012). But the figures regarding women users of the Internet in general are not known.

ICTs-apartheid in Afghanistan

To fully comprehend the gender-biased use of the Internet in Afghanistan, one must understand the gender discriminations instituted by different economic, social and cultural and political factors.

According to any objective standards, life for Afghan women is harsh beyond comprehension. Fourteen years after 9/11, the war-ravaged country has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world (Sierra Leone was number one): 1700 out of every

100,000 women die during pregnancy or childbirth, only 28.1 percent of the Afghan population is literate, and among women, it is even low: 12.6% (CIA World Factbook:2011).

Such national and international women and human rights bodies as Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the Human Rights Watch, the Amnesty International etc continue highlighting violence against Afghan women.

Despite Afghanistan's ratification of CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1980), and rights promised in the Constitution of Afghanistan, women suffer from unequal citizenship and legal entitlements. The exercise of the fundamental freedoms of expression and information is doubly constrained by patriarchal laws and practice, and by economic and political conflicts whose impact is also gendered.

A decade ago, Stabile and Kumar (2005) observed that when we look at the condition of women in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that the US never really had their liberation in mind. While some things have changed since the collapse of the Taliban for women, much remains the same. In 2015 too, their observation holds true. Post 9/11, women may now venture out in certain regions without a male escort, but they still do not enjoy some very basic human rights.

The Afghan women situation becomes even grim, as far ICTs are concerned, if we keep in mind a generalised feminist research pointing out women's unequal relation with technology. The contextual force of existing gender relations continues to exert a strong influence on the relationship between women and technology since machines are considered man's domain (Primo, 2003). Therefore, women's capacity to exploit the potential of the new ICTs for empowerment is constrained in many different ways. This situation is worsened in socially conservative societies like Afghanistan where women are socially, religiously and politically less empowered in relation to women in Western societies. Women's empowerment here implies their ability "to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits" (Sandys, 2005). Empowerment therefore, necessarily embodies challenging patriarchy at all levels of expression: social structures and relationships, moral, cultural values and norms, institutions and power structures (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003). This becomes even difficult in Afghanistan where the state is weak and unstable while unstable drug mafia and fundamentalists are

dominant.

The cultural and training barriers

According to Moghadam (1999), Afghanistan is situated in what demographer Caldwell (1982) calls ‘the patriarchal belt,’ and is an extreme case of that which Kandiyoti (1988) identifies as ‘classic patriarchy.’ In Afghanistan, as in other patriarchal settings, the central social unit is the extended family, where the senior man has authority over everyone else, including younger men. This point has also been confirmed by anthropologist and activist Carol Mann (2010) when she writes: ‘In Afghanistan, there are three principal legal references: constitutional law, the Quran and the system of customary law known as Farhang, the most dominant and strictest version of what is called Pashtunwali (the way of the Pashtuns). Originally an ancient honor code, Farhang ensures the dominance of the oldest male of any household, followed by married sons, unmarried sons and grandsons, then wives (with the youngest at the bottom). Collective decisions are taken by patriarchs in councils called jirgas, where all have to be in agreement.’ In such a society women are seen and considered as weak (Zaeefa), half of man (neem-e mard), mentally disabled (naqisul aqal) , property (Koch or Kada in Pashto).

I have been witness to the beating and humiliation of women for simple reasons such as not being able to cook well or laughing aloud.

The socially constructed perspectives and cultural norms in Afghanistan further engender gender disparity and hinder women’s progress. In Afghan society, men and women are segregated in all facets of life. Add to this the mistrust of ICTs as a tool of modernity with the potential to corrupt their traditions, beliefs and values of which women play a central role. In Afghanistan, physical segregation of women applies strongly in rural regions, less so in big cities such as Kabul where women’s education is segregated up to high school while public transport has special seats for women. However, women and men do work alongside each other in most governmental and other offices.

The second factor—as mentioned above—is that the ICTs initiatives, such as government policies and ICTs training that are required to sustain and support gender neutral access to education, economic and political empowerment, are themselves gender biased. In the first place, computer courses are not available at public colleges and schools.

One has to go to a private school for a computer course. It costs at least 500 Afghanis (roughly \$20) a month in Kabul. A few families are ready to spend this money on their daughters when the boys' education is always given preference. Also, many families do not want to send their daughters to schools offering co-education.

However, officially the government as well as civil society continue talking about computer training for women to placate the international community lavishly funding in the post-9/11 scenario. These policies rarely translate into reality.

Money, time and mobility

The lack of basic facilities and infrastructures in Afghanistan may suggest that ICT-specific terms like “universal service” and the “digital divide” are inherently flawed concepts as they separate ICTs from their broader economic and social milieus. For instance, telecommunication service to the Afghan poor is desirable, however, poor women cannot eat information or phones and they cannot feed technology to their families. “Technology to the poor” may sound a promising slogan at briefings seminars held under the auspices of foreign donors but ICTs cannot substitute demands like water purification systems, viable agricultural programmes, health care, education, and basic democratic rights. Most importantly, in case of ICTs, mere absence of electrification is a scandal. Only 30 percent of Afghanistan is electrified (World Bank: 2011).

It will not be surprising that women's access to ICTs in particular the Internet, in Afghan society is not welcomed. If girls are seen frequently reading a book or sitting in front of computer, the immediate reaction is that *dokhtar Maktabi wa computari shoda* (the girl has become school- and computer-addict).

Also when practically all communications facilities cost money, in such societies owing to a range of intersecting factors, women are less likely to have money to buy televisions, radio sets or computer. Even when a radio or TV set is available, accessing them when they wish remains desirable as the household technology is controlled by husband/father. Women are also less likely to have the money to pay bills for information services, especially when other needs (food, education, etc.) have higher priority. As Primo (2003) asserts where there is no access to education, health care, proper accommodation, enough food, electricity, roads,

transport or credit, and other development inputs cannot be obtained (as is the case with the majority of women population in Afghanistan) access to and use of ICTs will be limited in its impact.

The GDP per capita was US\$ 572 for 2010, in Afghanistan, according to the International Monetary Fund. But women share in the GDP is negligible. A very small number of women have jobs and control over income while Internet is an expensive affair. For instance, in Kabul one has to pay 50 Afghanis for an hour (\$1). There are Internet cards available which roughly costs equal amount and are valid for 24 hours. But the speed is irritatingly slow. To have monthly, 24-hour connection, it costs \$1000 in Kabul. When people in Afghanistan use dial-up connections to reach the Internet, they must then pay access fees as well as these phone charges.

The poor infra-structure is yet another problem. Since the speed of the Internet connections is miserably sluggish, it takes longer to download email and web pages - which makes it even expensive. Moreover, web pages and emails are becoming increasingly graphic-heavy and "large" in terms of file size.

The free time available to women is yet another question. Their gender role whereby daily house chores are women's job, women have almost no private time. Hence, they have even less time available to seek out ICTs connections or spend time online than men. While exploring that social time is gendered, Youngs (2001) argues that women are alienated from their own time, which is identified as most legitimately allocated to the service of others both in the home and at work. Drew and Paradice (1996: 563-4) in their research on how women felt about their time, found that in women's accounts time was talked about as if it were a scarce commodity which they did not own. Women's time appeared to belong not to themselves but to all the other people in their lives who were dependent on them and was discussed as if it were a kind of currency which could be 'given' to tending the needs of others and could be 'spent' on activities such as work, housework and childcare.

In male-dominated, traditional Afghan society the absolute majority of women devote their time, energy and talent to their families at the cost of their own lives. Stanley's (1992, 194-6) arguments about the relation of women to invention and technology are interesting in this respect. She locates the public/private divide again as key to understanding why invention

tends to be associated primarily with men. She (*Ibid*: 198) makes a straightforward but powerful point: Freedom from distraction is as important as time itself. If a man wants to retreat into his study to work out an idea, his wife will keep the children occupied while he does so, but the reverse would still be surprising. In Afghan society not only the reverse is surprising but not acceptable even for so called educated, progressive men.

As also suggested by the findings of time use surveys conducted in a number of countries, which showed that women use ICTs for communication (mainly email) and electronic banking, while men spend time browsing the Internet, downloading software, and reading newspapers. Women's greater family and nurturing responsibilities mean that they usually have less time, and less choice, when it comes to spending their money. The double burden of women working in and outside the home has, for the majority of women, increased the pressure on both their time and their capacity to view their time as their own. However, the use of ICTs can breach public/private divides in their conventional forms (Youngs, 2001). The virtual communities of the Internet allow such debate to take place across boundaries of nation, culture and gender (Harcourt, 1999).

Similarly, in most parts of Afghanistan, women's mobility is much more restricted than that of men. This may be the result of social customs that forbid women to travel unaccompanied, or because of family and caring responsibilities that make it difficult for women to move far from home, or the effect of unaffordable public and/or private transport in the context of women's limited earnings (compared to that of men in similar socio-economic levels) but also most importantly lack of security forbid women's mobility. This lack of mobility is fundamental given the absence of connectivity in rural areas, where up to 80 percent of the population live (World Bank, 2011).

Furthermore, apart from the internal barriers felt by many women (fear of technology, lack of self-confidence, etc.) that restrict their use of ICTs, gender-specific structural barriers reinforce women's lower usage of ICTs compared to men. These barriers include numerous cultural practices. Lida Ahmad (2011), for instance, an activist friend of mine goes to Internet cafe in Kabul close to her home. At the cafe, she is constantly stared at and subjected to teasing or other forms of sexual harassment. Afghan youth generally come to internet cafes for visiting porn and entertainment sites. However, this culture is slowly changing as well as more and more girl students are availing internet wherever and whenever possible. At Kabul

University Internet Cafe, girls use of the internet for research purposes has not only increased but seen as inevitable.

Afghan women fighting back gender digital divide

Young educated Afghan women, nonetheless, with an access to the internet, are making huge efforts to avail every opportunity offered by new computer technologies to gain more information and establish relations with women in other countries, make online friends and are even dating. I for example know a family acquaintance, Rasooli, living in Holland who met his Afghan wife, Nooria, online in 2006. Nooria was working with Dutch embassy in Kabul. They met online and are now married for 6 years.

All these tasks which tantamount to breaking taboos, owe to the anonymity available online as people may surf on the Internet without their identity being known to others. As Summer Hathout, co-founder of the Muslim Women's League points out, "I think for the first time for a lot of Muslim women they can be equal partners in a discussion on anything, that is, I think, primarily the beauty of it—that nobody knows who you are" (Kort, 2005). In this way, as well as opening up participation, the Internet obscures the line between public and private spaces.

Under the new technology the computerized *hijab* is at hand: women can more easily stay at home while continuing to participate in a computerized workplace. And yet, on the other hand, by gradually abolishing the distinction between home and the workplace, Internet technology may also give women the opportunity to integrate themselves into the economic and political global community (Mazrui and Mazrui, 2001).

Similarly, there are numerous examples of how women who are mainly part of a small, educated urban elite or activists and working in NGOs or students of Kabul University in Afghanistan are using ICTs in particular for their own empowerment, they are joining the cyber community and more women's groups now have better and easier access to donors and information on funding agencies, and to information on the regional and international activities of the women's movement. When women do have access, it is generally in their workplace, and they use it at their work places. In the workplace, the majority of women use IT and ICTs for routine office work; far fewer use them as a tool for communication and

information sharing.

At homes either there are no Internet connections or even if there is, even working and educated women have no time to use this facility. Even these women are very careful in using while online because privacy, security and Internet rights are important thematic areas for women. Women's concerns include having secure online spaces where they can feel safe from harassment, enjoy freedom of expression and privacy of communication, and are protected from electronic snooping. Hence, for example many friends on Facebook in or from Afghanistan, do not upload their photos, do not use their real names or reveal their real identity.

Besides individual cases, Internet opportunities have been exploited by organised groups. I will highlight some cases below. Since RAWA's Web site has been one of the most mentioned and used feminist websites dealing with Afghanistan, I will instead very briefly introduce few other groups.

The Humanitarian Organization for Local Development (HOLD)

The Humanitarian Organization for Local Development, or HOLD, is one such example. Established in 2008, HOLD runs a Women/ Girls Empowerment and Resource Center, with the help of France-based NGO Femaïd, in Farah province. Situated in western Afghanistan, near the Iranian border, and ignored by the major aid agencies, Farah is one of the remote areas where women's lives are extremely hard, to the point that self-immolation is a frequent occurrence. The level of health and literacy is extremely low, infant and maternal mortality are very high.

At Women/Girls Empowerment and Resource Center, girls and women get English language and computer training. There are 200 girls getting computer skills and learning English language. However, most important fact is that the Centre offers online services. In Farah, besides UN and NGO offices, there are only two public internet cafes where one can avail online services. Owing to cultural inhibitions, it is out of question for a girl to go to an internet café in Farah. This Center is the first and the only opportunity available to women. This has become such a big thrill that even unlettered women are visiting the centre in groups to 'have a look' on how 'online world' works.

The Afghan Child Education and Care Organization (AFCECO)

The Afghan Child Education and Care Organization, or AFCECO, is yet another example of women taking daring initiative through the ICTs. Though AFCECO is aimed at providing refuge to orphans yet the fact is important that a woman, Andeisha Farid (30), initiated the project and sustaining it through her world-wide Internet connections.

The AFCECO was launched in 2003 when Andeisha Farid established a safe house for 20 Afghan children in Islamabad (Pakistan) who couldn't afford going to school. This small shelter soon turned into a well-established orphanage when Charity Help International teamed with AFCECO to launch a Child Sponsorship Program (www.charityhelp.org/afceco). This program allowed individuals from around the world to go online and sponsor Afghan children. As a result one orphanage opened after another and now AFCECO runs 11 orphanages in Afghanistan and Pakistan, caring for over 600 children. Two of AFCECO's outstanding students who have been with AFCECO since they were little girls are presently receiving a world-class secondary education living in Milan with their Italian sponsors. They both speak five languages and engage in a variety of extracurricular activities such as dance, karate, snowboarding and debate.

Malalai Jaya Defence Committe

Kensinger (2003) points out that due to the official silencing of most women (as well as others) within Afghanistan by the Taliban (and other fundamentalist groups and worlds), simply placing information from within the Taliban controlled areas on the Web became a necessary and radical form of political action. Therefore another important example is the website of former member of parliament in Afghanistan, Malalai Joya, a noted activist . She served as MP in the National Assembly from 2005 to 2007, when she was dismissed for publicly denouncing the presence of what she considered to be warlords.

Her suspension in May 2007 generated protest internationally and appeals for her reinstatement were signed by high profile writers, intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky, and politicians including Members of Parliament from many Western countries. In 2010, Time Magazine placed Malalai Joya on their annual list of the 100 most influential people in

the world. The Foreign Policy magazine has also listed Malalai Joya in its annual list of the Top 100 Global Thinkers. On March 8, 2011, The Guardian listed her among "Top 100 women: activists and campaigners". Besides Hamad Karzai, she is perhaps the most known internationally politician from Afghanistan. She lives underground and stays in touch with her supporters domestically and globally through emails, her website and Facebook. She has over 7000 Facebook fans, receives thousands of hits every month and can be in general contacted on email only.

But for thousands of women activists including perhaps Malali Joya, one of the problems in using the internet for information and knowledge is language and content that does not 'speak to them'.

It also must be noted that these examples are still sporadic and not widespread enough: in large part, the problem lies with the political, social and economic instability in most areas, low levels of education and illiteracy, reinforced by poverty, high inflation rates, ongoing armed conflict or other forms of civil unrest, large-scale natural disasters, lack of national policies promoting ICTs as a tool for development, as shown by poor ICTs infrastructure such as inefficient telephone services and a total lack of electricity in many of the more rural and remote parts of the country, unaffordable computer hardware and proprietary software, as well as the cost of maintenance and connectivity. Some of these factors affect both female and male populations in a generalized way. Yet in many cases these overall constraints are filtered through specific gender-based determinants that cause women to be particularly disadvantaged.

CONCLUSION

The virtual world offers radically new settings for women's communications as well as empowerment. However, it is not merely women's access to technology, their knowledge or digital skills that counts. The circumstances in which women are able to make use of the ICTs are equally, if not more, important. Once able to create favourable milieu, they begin exercising their freedoms and creating new possibilities for them, it becomes a liberating experience. Most importantly, they are confronting the embedded male domination of technology. In the process they are even able to find new identities. The ICT system is generally organised on elitist, patriarchal, techno-centric, non-democratic lines and based on capitalist values. Hence, transformatory gender politics will need to question these values and

search for ethical alternatives. Despite the gender digital divide and many other problems faced by women, the ICTs provide an important forum for women to circumnavigate restrictions placed upon them in the gender segregated societies like Afghanistan. However, it remains important that women organise themselves on platforms like RAWA or provided help like HOLD, to secure virtual spaces for them. As Kensinger (2003) points out that the potential of the Internet for radical change will only be realised if it inspires us to unplug from the cyber fantasy and move into the streets to affect change not only in the cyber-imaginary, but in the real world lives of women and men.

Also, in countries like Afghanistan, the slow pace of economic progress throughout the last 15 years, suggests that steps should be taken promptly to develop a practical and culturally acceptable approach to help the general population but most importantly women take advantage of the benefits of the ICTs. Hence, the issues of infrastructure availability, costs, know-how, and the ubiquitous question of women's multiple cultural and social burdens and norms suggest the need for policy changes and changes of mentality that would prove to men in patriarchal society that ICTs like education are essential for women so that women can fully benefit from today's information and communication technologies.

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