

Why, Sis! Gender, WSIS and Tunis

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The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process, which culminates in a second summit in Tunis in November 2005, is a global performance of political talk, of the staging of different forms and different modes of articulation around the contested notion of 'information society'. Unusually for such processes, there are two summits (an interim one was held in Geneva in November 2003) and civil society and other stakeholders have been part of the process, not simply curious outsiders.

The first summit was held in the dank and dreary Palexpo, an extension of Geneva airport, a number of cavernous and cold airport hangars that did not seem full even with 11,000 people milling about and all the hot air of our collective pontifications. Security was tight as a noose with electronic picture ID tags and electronic inspection of all bags and outdoor clothing. There were in effect two distinct Summits happening (not to say 11,000 different experiences as each participant meandered along their own path of interest).

The first was the formal high politics of rhetorical performance, a Warholian five minutes of fame for kings (Lesotho), presidents (Rwanda, Croatia, Armenia, Finland, etc.), prime ministers (Pakistan, France, Ireland, Tonga, etc.), ministers of info and other lower political pecking orders, depending how (un)important this event is considered to be. Indeed, examination of the different ministries represented, that include Communications, Information Technology and Telecommunications Planning, Foreign Affairs, Interior, Information Industry, Transport, Innovation and Technology, Education, Economics and Labour, Commerce, Energy, Development Cooperation, etc, tells us something not only about the varying governmental structures of global states but also about the wide remit of WSIS with its implications for all these different policy arenas.

The event was opened by Kofi Annan, and for the most part, the South sent its big-wigs: Mugabe, and Mubarak, and Khatami. The nuances in the articulation of positions was fascinating, with unexpected turns. For example, Khatami spoke of delegating power to the people and placing the 'empowerment of human beings at the forefront of our efforts'. Ahearn, the Irish PM, talked of 'drawing authority and strength from the people'.

The US and UK hardly bothered. The US was represented by John Marburger III, a presidential envoy – and Microsoft – while the UK sent the Minister for E-Communications and Telecommunications of the DTI, Stephen Timms. Marburger was keen to reduce WSIS to an 'algorithm of technology-based innovation' based on an infrastructure of science, skills and a 'nurturing environment for entrepreneurial fulfilment', a disconcertingly apt example of

hegemony as compact articulation of different elements rolled up into math-speak.

This protocol summitry plodded on for three days solid, 193 speakers in an order apparently decided by choosing lots, so that most of the time the plenary hall that can probably seat 3,000 was quite empty, with just a few nationalist faithfuls sitting in to hear the speech of their particular head of state or political master.

Wise is – Civil Society

The alternative (almost parallel) summit, held in rooms dotted around the enormous facility, comprised the livelier presentations and discussions of the various strands of civil society. Geneva was the culmination of three years of preparatory meetings orchestrated initially by the ITU, the telecommunications union that gave the process a technologicistic slant from the start. What made the WSIS process special is that for the first time in UN history, non-governmental organizations were participating alongside governments and the private sector. The aim was to incorporate a multi-stakeholder, consensual approach (reflecting the interests of governments, the private sector and civil society) in all deliberations.

Divided into numerous caucuses, working groups and 'coordinating spaces', the civil society debates ran the gamut of legal, economic, developmental, political, organizational and cultural topics covered by the wide rubric of 'Information society'. Amongst the most lively was a World Forum on Communication Rights organised by the CRIS Campaign, which argued that a wider and deeper understanding and support for human rights, including communication rights, is needed in addition to existing rights such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Why, Sis!

WSIS has also been gendered from the start. The WSIS Gender Caucus (www.genderwsis.org) grew out of a regional meeting in Bamako, Mali, as UNIFEM became concerned that gender dimensions be included in the WSIS process (Hafkin, 2004). A multi-stakeholder group of men and women from national governments, NGOs, private sector and the UN system, it was concerned to position gender issues in WSIS and to ensure that gender advocates were involved in every aspect of its planning and implementation.

The NGO Gender Strategies Working Group developed out of the first Prep-Com meeting in

Geneva in 2002, included some long-established groups like the Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Programme (APCWNSP) (www.apc.org), the International Women's Tribune Centre and ISIS Manila, some of the major women's organizations in the field of media, information technologies and development that have been active for well over two decades and have extensive global-local networks and info-tech practices.

The two groups worked together, and their materials and analysis have meant that gender concerns were well articulated and well organised, with newer groups like WOUGNET, the Ugandan women who host the gender caucus websites and electronic debates (<http://www.wougnet.org/WSIS/genderstatement.htm>) winning numerous prizes for their efforts.

The Gender Caucus posted web materials with suggestions about how to introduce WSIS issues into local discussions, what the key issues were and, always and crucially, how to link issues around information technologies to wider issues of social, economic and political development. The Caucus was clear about the need to consider ICTs and media together, given the extent of digitalization and convergence, and flagged the most critical concerns in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in the areas of ICTS.

As Gillian Marcelle, the founding convenor of the Caucus, says, 'Even if good information infrastructure and service delivery are in place, without explicit gender analysis and incorporation of the results into policy, programmes and projects, the benefits of ICT may bypass women'.

The rhetoric of the Summit Draft Declaration of Principles affirmed that the development of ICTS provides enormous opportunities for women, that Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes and toward that end 'we should mainstream the gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end' (Doc WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E, p. 2).

But the gender issue was just one way in which the weighty rhetoric of summitry was punctured by its own practice. For all the talk of 'gender mainstreaming', where were the women?

We Sees Gender Invisibility

There were lots of women at Geneva, the African women in traditional costume providing some welcome colour in their costumes amongst the drab grey of suits, but they were mainly among the NGO/civil society sector, GKN award winners and grassroots project organisers.

Of the 193 ministerial-level speakers in the formal plenary process, there were 25 women, about 13%. A glossy silver magazine, WSIS 2003, produced by the ITU and distributed to all delegates, included 31 articles by 34 named contributors, of whom four were women. The World Electronic Media Forum, supported by the World Broadcasting Unions (WBU) as 'a platform for leaders of the world's media to address the many issues raised by the new global media environment' (Kofi Annan) included 58 speakers of whom 6 were women. Three high-level round-tables had 15 women among 96 speakers, while UNESCO held a High-Level Symposium on Knowledge Societies where two out of 20 speakers were women. And so on.

There are two important points about this gender politics. One is the profound contradiction within the WSIS process, where the gap between the expressed intentions around gender equality and the actual embodied speakers/writers is quite startling. For all the material that talked of gender-mainstreaming, the comparative invisibility of women in the formal dark-suited affair was profound. Gender politics matters at the simple level of numerical representation on panels and in debates: there needs to be a 50/50 gender split because women, whether informed by the politics of experience or by feminist theory or both, would bring different perspectives to bear in all the debates and not just those that focus on gender.

The second is the tension between WSIS and the 'real world' politics of gender where the ongoing lack of gender balance in the political sphere, in media decision-making, in business and in academe around the world also challenges the rhetorical gesture toward gender-mainstreaming. The articulation of gender equity remains to be actualised in these elite realms as well as at the 'grassroots' and because there are fewer women in positions of power and responsibility to call upon so conference and panel organisers have to work harder. Contrarily, the space of summitry, which is after all 'only words', is a space where gender equity could be played out.

Parallel processes: Progress and regression

The articulation of concerns about women's participation and gender equality now runs through much global governance activity. The promotion of 'gender equality and empowerment' is the third of the Millennium Development Goals. In activities associated with the World Social Forum feminists are developing their own networks and critiques (see, for example, www.penelopes.org). The Global Fund for Women supports hundreds of women's organizations around the world that are demanding nothing less than democratic participation in their daily lives, and in their legal and political institutions.

At an event entitled 'Women, Law and Democracy' the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Dr. Shirin Ebadi spoke with clarity from her perspective as an Iranian woman, lawyer and human rights activist and made three resounding points: that democracy requires society to make a clear separation between church and state, and to refuse to privilege any one religion over another; that democracy cannot be forced upon people at the point of a gun; and, last, but not least, that

there can be no true democracy without guaranteeing women's full freedom and equality.

It thus does seem that over the past decade the global rhetoric of gender rights and equality has diffused widely. However, ironically, while the WSIS process appears to recognise both the processes of convergence and the significance of gender, the activities around Beijing + 10 are in danger of forgetting media and communications altogether, despite their centrality to the original Beijing Declaration of 1995.

In March 2005, a number of women's media and information and communication organizations from AMARC to Women's eNews attending the 49th session of the UN Committee on the Status of Women (CSW) submitted a resolution calling on governments to ensure that women, media and ICT issues are kept on the agenda of the Beijing + 10 review and that the WSIS and Millennium Declarations are affirmed and implemented. Summits are essentially talk-fests, festivals of articulacy, as well as powerful moments of persuasion, or articulation of different positions and attempts to reach agreement.

The major lesson in political communication for women is that incessant vigilance and repetition is needed to keep gender issues salient within WSIS debates and communications issues alive within the Beijing debates. Victories of political rhetoric can be very ephemeral and need to be continually reasserted. Implementation is, of course, an even bigger hurdle.

The annoying but necessary repetition of gender concerns

The Gender Caucus keeps repeating that the significance of ICTs for development, and the growing demand for the extension of the benefits of the Information Society to all, rests on the understanding that ICTs are an instrument for achieving economic and social goals but are not simply an end in themselves. The Gender Caucus stresses the need for an intersectional approach that considers the diverse needs and perspectives of women and focuses on unequal power relations – not just between men and women, but more fundamentally between rich and poor, North and South, urban and rural, empowered and marginalised.

It summarised the final key Recommendations for Action from the Geneva summit (www.genderwsis/recommendations) as:

- Gender must be a fundamental principle for action

- Equitable participation in decisions shaping the Information Society

- New and old ICTs in a multimodal approach

- Designing ICTs to serve people

- Empowerment for full participation

- Research, Analysis and evaluation to guide action.

The long and dynamic history of women's global activism has provided very useful experience for promoting gender concerns within the civil society debates about the WSIS, itself part of the process of including gender within regimes of global governance.

The Gender Caucus was one of the best organized and best networked, with clear demands that gender advocacy and a 'gender lens' be involved in every aspect of planning and implementation of the WSIS. The women-centred approach in relation to media has focused on the need for better and more adequate representation, both in content and in employment arenas, and is coupled with the need for recognition and empowerment of women's voices. Recognition is not at odds with struggles for material redistribution, rather social esteem and achievement can be the basis for demands for greater equality.

Gender-sensitive approaches argue about the social construction of gendered positions through the processes of developing, diffusing and utilizing communications technologies. But women still often lack the critical mass of numbers and weight of speaking at international fora, and it is still a rare occasion for men to recognize voluntarily the issue of gender equality. That means not forsaking a 'women in media/technology' argument for a 'gender and technology' one, but pursuing both together. The rhetoric needs to be supported by action (Sreberny, 2004).

Globalization, democratization and communication processes are built around and further articulate the four Rs of rights, representation, recognition, redistribution and will only find full expression with gender equity. The future is global, participatory and more gender equal. Clearly WSIS is a process as much as a set of outcomes. Civil society groups and those concerned

specifically with gender have learnt a great deal and there is still a chance for some surprises at Tunis. But even if the final outcome disappoints, the lessons will still be useful. n

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