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Engendering Global Internet Governance: **Towards a strategy  
of constituting women as stakeholders.**

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, a wide ‘gender gap’ in the Internet governance global debate and organizations is identified. The argument is built on the thorough examination of the multistakeholder power dynamics in ICANN, UN WSIS, and UN IGF. In all these settings ‘multistakeholderism’ was adopted as the collaborative principle, yet insufficient appreciation of women’s participation, insights, contributions, and, ultimately, concerns has been identified.

The argument proposed in this paper links the perceived ‘gender gap’ to the lack of understanding of how the Internet is shaped and reshaped through uses in diverse social and economic contexts. After discussing *women’s representation* and the *effectiveness of women’s participation*, I propose constituting women’s organizations and movements as key stakeholders in the global collaborative process, and shifting women’s activist strategies *from advocacy to collaboration*, in order to sensitize the Internet global discourses and practices to gender perspectives.

## INTRODUCTION

In Gender Studies, particular practices and discourses have traditionally been prioritized. Thus, in writings on gender and ICTs, women's experiences in *using* communication technologies and women's participation in *designing* technologies have been studied extensively since the 1980s (see, for instance, Berg, 1996; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Cockburn, 1983; Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Green & Adam, 2001; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985; Plant, 1998; Turkle, 1995; Wajcman, 1991). This focus has been for good reason, for as Judy Wajcman (2004) notes "there are dramatic gender differentials in access to, and control over, electronic networks" (p. 4). For her, and a number of other authors, "[e]ngagement with the process of technical change must be part of the renegotiation of gender power relations".

In contrast, *women's participation in ICT governance* (policymaking and policy implementation) has not been significantly scrutinized, although, in the literature on women in the public sphere, the political domain has been mapped as a primary male-dominated area of gender contestation. In recent years, the 'women and ICTs' academic debate has been applied to the UN-initiated multistakeholder dialogue on Information Society.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the analytical focus has been on the effectiveness of lobbying and advocacy strategies in global organizations, while the radical epistemological shift in global governance – from intergovernmental treaties to multistakeholder collaboration – has been left unaddressed.

In this paper, a new domain of research is outlined, where the 'shared power' rationale of a multistakeholder collaboration is seen as challenging the conventional women's practices of engendering the political debate by allowing the constitution of a new stakeholder identity, and the invention of new and more effective participatory strategies. To empirically explore this argument, a closer look is taken at the global Internet governance debate as a subfield of the ICT governance, where multistakeholderism has been pioneered at the global level. The thorough examination of the power dynamics in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) (1998 – 2008) multistakeholder process, close observation of the UN World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) (2003 – 2005) debate, and participant

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<sup>1</sup> Through the 2003-2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), such issues as enabling girls' and women's access to ICTs, removing barriers to education and the technology professional field, and empowering women through ICT use, have been embedded in the global agenda (see the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action – December 12, 2003, and the WSIS Tunis Agenda for the Information Society and Tunis Commitment – November 18, 2005).

observation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process (2007 - 2008), suggest that the observable 'gender gap' has not yet been addressed effectively. As a result, women's voices and concerns are marginalized in the debate on governing critical Internet resources, on access and diversity as development aspects, and on the security of the global network.

At the UN WSIS, the adopted multistakeholder format allowed the women's advocates certain visibility and effective intervention (see Jensen, 2007, on the WSIS Gender Caucus). Nevertheless, the shared perception among the civil society participants was that women's voices were not heard due to some structural imbalances, such as the limited number of women-participants representing non-governmental organizations, the gender-insensitive agenda and issue formulation, and the dominant technical and political discourse at the Summit.

In this paper, these shortcomings in promoting a gender specific perspective on governing the Internet are seen as an opportunity for reinventing women's inclusion at the global level. This view stems from the realization that, in a multistakeholder arrangement, only stakeholders that ground their participation in the equal-status right can count on the benefits of the collaborative process. In other words, to 'share power' with other participants requires certain efforts in *identity building*, *coalition building*, and *strategy building*. To substantiate this argument, I formulate a strategy of constituting women as a key stakeholder group in Internet governance and propose it as an activist platform.<sup>2</sup> To be recognized as a legitimate stakeholder group, women's organizations must insist on their *right to be proportionally represented at the leadership level, to participate in agenda setting and consensus building, to propose policy recommendations supported by the consensus of broad constituencies, and to require accountability from the executive governance bodies (national governments and international organizations) for the implementation of those decisions.*

To build this argument I first review relevant theoretical perspectives that have been developed in Gender Studies and Organization Studies. To underscore the significance of power relations in technology governance, the liberal feminist

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<sup>2</sup> This argument was first presented at the 2006 Canadian Communication Association's Conference in Toronto (June 1, 2006; see the abstract of my presentation at <http://www.acc-cca.ca/reg/viewabstract.php?id=207&cf=>). Subsequently, interviews were conducted at the 2007 UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Rio de Janeiro, where the 'women as stakeholders' argument was proposed as an alternative to the employed strategies of lobbying and advocacy.

argument on women's exclusion from the public policymaking sphere and the social constructivist tradition of construing technology as a product of negotiations among designers, policymakers and users are presented. The theoretical perspectives on women and technology are then considered in relation to the conceptualization of multistakeholder collaboration in Organization Studies.

The theoretical framework is then applied to the case of global Internet governance. I begin with a brief exploration of the political construction of the Internet governance domain, where certain expert knowledge, organizational design, policy issues, and conceptualization of the new ICTs have been privileged. As the research suggests, at the three stages of the Internet governance development as a political field, namely, ICANN (1998 - 2002), WSIS (2003 - 2005), and the UN IGF (2006 and 2007), the gender perspective of Internet governance has been marginalized. The observable structural imbalances in the organizational settings, in terms of *women's representation* and the *effectiveness of women's participation* suggest that global Internet governance domain has been constructed in the dominant International Relations discursive mode as a gender-neutral area of technology governance. Then, I propose a strategically new approach to sensitizing the discourses and practices to a gender perspective through constituting women's organizations and movements as key stakeholder groups in the collaborative policymaking process.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AND TECHNOLOGY**

The relative exclusion of women from the technological public sphere has been broadly documented and debated in Gender Studies (see Bardini & Horvath, 1995; Bimber, 2000; Cherny & Weise, 1996; Cockburn, 1985; Green et al., 1993; Hacker, 1989; Haddon, 1992; Hapnes & Sorensen, 1995; Hofmann, 1999; Oldenziel, 1999; Oost, 1998; Rasmussen & Hapnes, 1991; Rommes, 2006; Schelhowe & Vosseberg, 1991; Stanley, 2003; Sutton, 1991). Frequently, feminists have focused on advocating the broadening of access for girls to science education and for young women to technical professional fields. Yet, this strategy has been criticised as reinforcing the male dominance in the areas of technology invention, design, and use, while attempting to carve a niche for women. This is because it implicitly accepts gender division as the 'norm' in a field where masculinity has been and is produced, reproduced and articulated as competitiveness and a linear/essentialist rationality.

As an emerging domain of International Relations, global Internet governance is hosting an experiment in public policymaking, namely *multistakeholder collaboration*, which is seen as a feasible alternative to the conventional intergovernmental treaties regime. The operational and structural rationale of a multistakeholder formation is the principle of ‘shared power’, and by definition stakeholders meet as equals to constitute a new domain of governance or to resolve a conflict situation by devising a new governance regime.

In this paper, the effective participation of women’s constituency representatives in the global Internet governance debate is explored in the light of this experiment in ‘multistakeholderism’. Building on insights gleaned from theory about ‘women and technology’, and considering emerging multistakeholder global governance formats, this paper introduces new possibilities for constituting women’s organizations as a key stakeholder group, holding the right of equal representation and participation in the collaborative process.

The focus of this paper is on providing an alternative strategy aimed at sensitizing the political process to gender perspectives. Two of the best known gender perspectives are outlined next in order to illuminate the strengths and shortcomings of current feminist strategies for participation in the political arena.

First, the liberal-feminist argument of women’s exclusion from the public policy-making sphere accepts that creating a regulatory regime for a global communication network has traditionally been the nation-state domain (i.e. via intergovernmental and international organizations). In general, the international relations field has been male centered, as diplomatic administration – a male dominated field - is seen as the paramount high-politics public sphere. Feminist scholars have provided powerful insights about the gendered public/private divisions in society (see, for instance, Ackelsberg & Shanley, 1996; Allen, 2004; Nartsock, 1996; Squires, 1999). Historically, women have been excluded, and more to the point of the current argument, discouraged from participating in political debates and policymaking process, which were reserved for ‘experts’ and politicians (almost exclusively, men).

In the liberal feminist tradition, it is further assumed that the under-representation of women at governing levels reflects differing male and female attitudes towards technology and towards Internet governance. Indeed, in a pilot study on the impact of ICTs on women’s lives conducted in 1998 in Canada and Kenya,

researchers discerned decisive differences in men's and women's perceptions of the issues of online privacy. In the Canadian case, "[t]he men expressed concern over who was the overall organizing body on the Internet. But while the women wanted to have this information to satisfy their need for accountability regarding privacy violations, the men framed their concern in terms of control and ownership" (White, Shade & Brayton, 2001, 53).

Second, in the social constructivist tradition in Gender/Technology studies, technology is analyzed as a product of social, political and cultural negotiations among designers, policymakers and other social groups. Similarly, when political outcomes are considered, such as regulatory regimes and policies, the analysis tends to focus on the value-negotiating process in terms of who is allowed into the process and who dominates it. When these parameters are identified, it is feasible to comprehend how biases are embedded in rules and regimes, especially when the process is left unchecked.

Both frameworks use the broad 'gender and power' discourse, which is still preoccupied with "how *states govern gender* and how *gender organizes governance*" (emphases in the original) (Brush, 2003, 34). They do not account for the shifting governance practices at the global level where the stakeholder 'shared power' principle operates.

### **THEORIES OF MULTISTAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION**

By announcing the creation of the Gender Coalition at the inaugural UN IGF (2006), the participants demonstrated their commitment to constituting the gender perspective as an important dimension of discussions at the second Internet Governance Forum (Rio de Janeiro, 2007).

Yet, as my analysis suggests, for women's voices and concerns to be included, for sensitizing technical, market, and policy discussions and practices to women's interpretation and uses of technologies - women's organizations and movements must be constituted as an important stakeholder group.

To substantiate this view, I will draw here on some concepts from Interorganizational Studies and Globalization Studies, developed in relation to multistakeholder collaboration as an emergent mode of governance.

In Mitroff's conceptualization of interorganizational collaboration, stakeholders are defined as "all those interest groups, parties, actors, claimants, and

institutions - both internal and external to the corporation - that exert a hold on it. That is... who either affect or who are affected by a corporation's actions, behavior, and policies” (1983, 4). With the emergence of interorganizational collaborations (in the 1970s and 1980s), the notion of stakeholders, inevitably, broadened to encompass their decision-making capacities, the power dynamics of their interactions, and the constituencies they represented.

In the 1990s, under the global governance perspective, the view of the existence of interconnected policy arenas was developed (see Rittberger, 2001; Reinicke & Deng, 2000). In this view, multiple social actors participate in the decision-making process at those arenas on the merits of their perceived stakes and proven competencies. As Jeffrey Luke (1991) suggests, “[i]nterconnected policy arenas are more accurately characterized by [the metaphor of] shared power” (40). The reason for the constitution of ‘interdependent ventures’, as Nancy C. Roberts (1991) explains, is that “no one actor has the required resources to accomplish the desired ends” (103). The stakeholders are conscious of the fact that they cannot achieve acceptable outcomes through unilateral action. This justifies the collaborative process as a viable decision-making approach, although it is often slow, time-consuming, and full of compromises.

Only in the last two decades has the literature on interorganizational relations begun to provide some insights into the dynamics and evolution of those relations. Barbara Gray’s empirical theory of collaboration (1989), which combined perspectives of organizational behavior and political science, suggested that, in a collaboration, stakeholders “constructively explore their differences” (226). The aim is “to create a richer, more comprehensive appreciation [common understanding] of the problem... than any one of them could construct alone” (5), and resolve conflicts, or advance shared visions on the collective good (5).

The theory of collaboration suggests, as well, that at the problem-setting stage, the stakeholder interdependence is recognized and acknowledged. This is the stage when the stakeholders are identified, their legitimacy is recognized, and common problem definitions on the issues that join them are produced.

At the direction-setting stage, stakeholders work on organizational and substantive policy issues. This is the stage where values are articulated, interests are



identified and juxtaposed, and “a sense of common purpose or direction” emerges (74).

Finally, the implementation stage requires attention to “dealing with constituencies” (86), “building external support” (87), structuring and “monitoring the agreement and ensuring compliance” (91).

The shared-power model, which Gray proposed, draws on the dynamics in a number of real-life collaborations. It is based on the inference that power dynamics are observable in each phase of collaboration. In the problem setting stage, power dynamics are conditioned by those “who define the nature of the problem” (121) (the conveners), for they decide how to address, “what actions will be taken with respect of solving it”, and even who will participate and in what forum the deliberations will occur. During the direction-setting phase, power dynamics emanate from control over both defining an agenda for the domain and determining the range of mutually acceptable solutions (‘power to strategize’).

Overall, as an experiment in governance, multistakeholder collaboration is based on the expectation that through collaborative efforts some positive outcomes will be produced. This is a powerful incentive for participation in a collaboration. To fulfill that expectation, conveners must incorporate a wide array of parties into the deliberations.

## **GOVERNMENTALITY AND ENGENDERING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

Although issues of Internet governance have been fiercely debated since the mid-1990s, women activists first appreciated this domain as a legitimate and important advocacy field only when the debate reached the United Nations arena<sup>3</sup>, and was framed in the development goals vernacular.

To explain the time-lag we should consider that the worldwide coalition of women organizations that evolved during and after the UN Decade for Women (1976 – 1985) was less familiar with the complex technological aspects of governing the Internet address resources<sup>4</sup> than with its development dimension. At the two-stage

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<sup>3</sup> In 2003, at the UN WSIS, the debate focused on the global governance of the key Internet resources and the development dimension of Internet governance.

<sup>4</sup> I refer here to the first phase in the institutionalization of the global Internet governance regime (1998 – 2002), when the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) was constituted as a private global policymaking authority in the Internet address and names system. In the original

UN WSIS (2003 and 2005), Internet governance issues were framed as an important layer of the global political project of building the Information Society. Thus, the WSIS Gender Caucus persistently advocated the application of ‘a gender lens’ to the complex economic and developmental aspects of the Information Society project.<sup>5</sup> As a result, ‘gender’ and ‘women’ were interchangeably employed during the deliberations, as well as in the WSIS “Declaration of Principles” and “Plan of Action”, “Tunis commitment” and “Tunis Agenda for the Information Society”.

Yet, the central question is, was this simply a stance of political correctness on the part of the convener (the International Telecommunications Union, ITU) and the government and business representatives, or was the process, indeed, sensitized to the gender concerns?

One cannot answer this question unequivocally. The reason is that engendering global governance would constitute a significant shift in governmentality, and such shifts can be detected only in emerging practices and policies along with discourses.<sup>6</sup> The women’s organizations that participated in the WSIS and in the inaugural Internet Governance Forum (IGF) (October-November 2006) demonstrated a high level of sophistication in converging diverse experiences in dynamic coalitions, influencing the policy agendas and debates, and translating gender-specific concerns to the dominant gender-neutral international politics’ vernacular. Nonetheless, as discussed further, there is ample number of testimonies and data suggesting that gender perspectives are not apparent at the Internet governance fora. How successful are those strategies? Is there an alternative, and, potentially, more successful, way of conceptualizing women’s participation and advocacy in Internet governance?

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organizational format (ICANN 1.0), the national governments were assigned the role of observers and advisors to the experimental multistakeholder consensus process. In 2002 – 2003, ICANN was reformed as a public-private partnership, and the governments were awarded the place of a key stakeholder group.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.isiswomen.org/onsite/wsis/caucus.html> for a brief presentation of the Gender Caucus activities, membership and recommendations. See also: Etta, 2005; WSIS, “Seoul-Gyeonggi Declaration”, 2005; Jensen, 2005b; 2005c; Huyer & Hafkin, 2006; IGF, “Statement”, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Introduced by Foucault (1991), the ‘governmentality’ concept has been later defined as “a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed)” (Gordon, 1991, 3); “the bodies of knowledge [theories, ideas, philosophies], belief and opinion in which we are immersed” (Dean, 1999, 16); the way in which thought both “operates within our organized ways of doing things” (Dean, 1999, 17 – 18) (“regimes of practices”) and “is embedded within programs for the direction and reform of conduct” (18). For theoretical reflections on the neo-liberal governmentality, see: Rose, 1996; Miller & Rose, 1993.

## **INTERNET GOVERNANCE AS AN EMERGING GLOBAL DOMAIN**

In a recent investigation of the emerging global Internet governance regime in ICANN (see Antonova, 2006), where I focused on identifying and making visible the power dynamics of the policymaking process, some interesting observations emerged. First, the domination of particular expert knowledge and the preference to organizational design that privileges the business interests resonate with conceptions of neo-liberal governmentality of ‘less government’ and ‘the private sector self-governance’. In this epistemological framework, technical expertise is privileged as the ‘entrance ticket’ to Internet governance debate, and multistakeholder collaboration competes for legitimacy with the conventional intergovernmental regulatory regime.

Second, since the Internet has been exclusively constructed by the policymakers as a commercial platform, the issues of property rights, security and privacy protection have been prioritized on the national governments’ policymaking agendas, deregulation policies have been promoted, and regulation-free competitive market have been created for emergent Internet services. In such a political environment, to sufficiently influence the debate has proven to be a Sisyphean task for the civil society representatives (concerns have been voiced related to freedom of expression on the Net, and rights of both access to infrastructures and language and content diversity in cyberspace).

Third, the understanding of the new information and communication technologies as all-mighty agents of economic development has been enthusiastically embraced by governments in developed and developing countries alike. Moreover, this view has been normatively codified in the international political discourse. While in ICANN 1.0 ‘Internet governance’ was interpreted narrowly as protecting trademarks in cyberspace, at the UN WSIS, and the IGF in the last three years, the term has been broadened to include the development aspects of the Information Society. Governments suddenly emerged again, like the phoenix from the ashes of the 1990s globalization debate, as the rightful political agencies in capacity building and infrastructure development.

Overall, since 2002, the “wild” experiment in Internet governance by a private global authority has been normalized by absorbing the new issue domain and the power-sharing organizational principle into the conventional ITU-led global telecommunications regime. Indeed, as it is reflected in the Work Group on Internet

Governance (WGIG) definition<sup>7</sup>, the existing intergovernmental process under the UN was upgraded to include businesses and civil society representatives, but the newly allowed ‘stakeholder’ roles have not been specified, and no promises have been made that they would have meaningful participation in the policymaking process.

## **WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN THE INTERNET GOVERNANCE DEBATE**

My main apprehension with the above-presented version of Internet governance is that, in the process, particular stakeholders’ perspectives, interests and concerns are prioritized on the basis of possessing (or, not possessing) expertise and contributing to the development of competitive markets, while others are marginalized and even excluded.

In both, ICANN, which introduced the multistakeholder collaboration formula to the International communications field, and WSIS, there was a deficiency of women’s participation, of an appreciation of women’s organizations’ insights and contributions, and, ultimately, of responding to the diverse women’s groups’ concerns. At both ICANN and WSIS, the gender dimension was neglected, although for different reasons.

In the former case, due to the technical experts’ fear of the ‘messy’ consensus process, there was strong pressure to limit ICANN’s mandate to manage the technical infrastructure; hence, the almost complete ineffectiveness of the non-commercial constituency’s efforts to build an at-large membership and influence the Board decisions.

In the case of WSIS, access to Internet was recognized, indeed, as a key political issue of the Information Society project. Yet, due to the applied overarching development framework, access was universalized and conceptualized, in modernist terms, as an indicator of progress. In parallel, the world-wide diversity of social and economic contexts in which the new ICTs are introduced and used, were not considered as a complexity factor. Instead, the aim of the WSIS organizers was rather to blend experiences and particularities into an all-embracing regulatory environment,

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<sup>7</sup>According to the WGIG definition, “*Internet governance is the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet*” (WGIG, 2005).

in which across-borders, online business practices can flourish and the army of technically-savvy consumers will grow in a predictable and protected cyberspace.

The inaugural IGF in Athens (2006) marked a new stage in the consolidation of the global stakeholder groups and the realization of their interdependencies. Gender sensitized discussions were to be expected at the forum, following the visible and constructive participation of the Gender Caucus at the WSIS. The participants who advocated gender equality, though, were disappointed with the low level of visibility given to the gender perspective at this unprecedented open stakeholder global gathering:

- Natasha Primo: “...*despite the best efforts of the organizers, a cursory perusal of the workshop programs [of the IGF] and its participants and even of this hall confirms that these spaces remain unacceptably man-dominated*” (IGF, October 30, 2006, “Opening Ceremony”, p. 15).
- Garba Bayero Agrabi, Tunisia: “*In the course of our discussions, we have seen that a large number of participants were not invited, for various different reasons... I’m talking here about women, people with disabilities, and those with special needs*” (IGF, November 2, 2006, “Taking Stock & The Way Forward Session”, p. 20).

These are the voices of those who understand that women are an important stakeholder group when the future of the global Net is discussed, and as such they must be included, and their concerns ought to be heard and considered.

## **HOW WIDE IS THE GENDER PARTICIPATORY GAP IN ICT POLICYMAKING?**

In order to understand the barriers to women’s participation in these practices and experiences, and, consequently, to strengthen women’s global alliances, we need an argument supporting the importance of closing the gender gap in Internet governance. I will elaborate here on only two aspects of this argument.

First, in terms of the liberal feminists’ aspirations of achieving gender equality and closing the gender participatory gap.

Although scarce and unsystematic, the ITU statistics demonstrate that in most countries the digital divide is further exacerbated by a gender gap in the use of the

Internet. Thus, according to 2002 data, only 13 countries in the world had already closed the gender digital divide or were approaching this status.<sup>8</sup>

From my observation of women's representation in ICANN's governing bodies, I suggest that the gender gap is much wider in the Internet governance realm than in the Internet user population. Currently, only three of the ICANN Board members are women, representing the US, Kenya and Brazil. In retrospect, since ICANN's inauguration in October 1998, there have been literally only a handful of women in ICANN's governing bodies – the Board and the supporting organizations' councils.

Interestingly, in 2000, when ICANN announced its experimental global online election of five at-large directors, more than 20 percent of the registered voters in North America were women. The ratio was 11.4 percent female to 76.6 percent male registered voters in the United States, and 9.3 to 79.2 percent in Canada.<sup>9</sup> It was illuminating to observe how, through the mobilizing efforts of women activist organizations, and taking advantage of the open global election format, women's participation in discussions on Internet governance were stimulated and made efficient. Nonetheless, all the elected directors were men.

After the 2002 ICANN reform, the Nominating Committee took note of the gender gap in ICANN's leadership, and, as a result, the rate of female nominees grew from 12 percent in 2003 to an astonishing 75 percent in 2005.<sup>10</sup>

Second, in terms of reconstituting women's subjectivity. Women's participation in the Internet governance process is particularly significant, in my view, because it marks, and reinforces, a shift in self-perception and self-actualization – from being constituted as an acted-upon consumer group (by national policymakers and corporate interests alike) to regaining agency in the process of social construction of a technology's regulatory framework. In effect, this is an emancipatory process where a number of stereotypes are challenged - such as 'women are not leaders but followers in the adoption of new technologies', and 'girls' and women's relation to technology is marked by technophobia'. This is also a process of enabling women to explore their own strengths and weaknesses in a political negotiation setting; a process of constituting women as policymakers, of reformulating gendered

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<sup>8</sup> See the ITU data presented in Hafkin, 2003, p.9, Table 1.

<sup>9</sup> See PRnewswire, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> See ICANN, 2005.

subjectivities, and thus reaching beyond the public/private dichotomy in closing the participatory gap.

### **WOMEN'S CONCERNS, OR WHY IT IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR INCLUSION**

As expressed by women-participants in the UN WSIS process, it is essential for women to be involved in the Internet governance process for a number of reasons. For one thing, this issue is discussed on the global fora from a development perspective, where the Information Age rhetoric promises benefits for each and every economy and society. Beginning with the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, in June 1995, women organizations around the world demonstrated that there is a number of issues associated with introducing ICTs (particularly, to developing countries), which are of concern to women, and should therefore be included in the UN agenda. Among them are privacy protection online (against so-called cyberstalking), a number of content issues (child pornography, protecting indigenous heritage through digitalization), and promoting women's entrepreneurship online as an empowering mechanism.

Additionally, women have complained about the English language barrier online, a serious issue particularly for women in developing countries, where the illiteracy level is significant. Thus, Kenyan women have pointed out that “[m]any illiterate women only speak their own tribal language” (White, Shade & Brayton, 2001, 57). This is an issue with political significance considering the online content created in local languages with a particular nationalistic or religious connotation.

### **THE STRATEGIC APPROACH: GENDER ADVOCACY VS. STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION**

So far I have discussed women's representation and participation in Internet governance related decision-making processes. While essential for closing the gender gap, this participation alone is not sufficient for the establishment of a gender sensitive Internet governance regime. In addition, women's voices need to be heard and their concerns need to be taken seriously and prioritized in designing policy mechanisms.

In the interviews I conducted in 2002 with several women in leadership positions in ICANN, they conveyed a common sense of frustration with the ineffectiveness of their participation in the deliberative process. For instance, a

Korean Internet expert, representing, at the time, the Non-commercial constituency on the DNSO Names Council, suggested that gender builds on nationality to cause disadvantage in ICANN: “Even though I try to be involved with this politics, as the main stakeholders, they [the Management] still do regard me as an observer, you know, because I’m not an American. And I’m not even European! So, if sometimes they can feel like ‘oh, well, she’s good!’, but ‘she is not important in this process’”.

Overall, only a small number of women have been able to overcome the hindrances of the discursive online and face-to-face environment in ICANN. Those barriers are: discussions conducted exclusively in technical English; highly-specialized technical expertise shared by mostly male participants; familiarity with legal, market and political regulations in the US and in international regimes; and the aggressive, confrontational style of debate. These features of the ICANN discourse without doubt have been intimidating for third-world countries’ participants, and especially for the small number of women among them.

What this suggests is that, in terms of analyzing gender deficiencies in the policymaking process in a more productive way, we have to focus on the power relations, which includes class, race, nationality and ethnicity, and culture, in addition to gender. The Internet governance process itself needs to accommodate the diversity of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the women in the world, to consider the priority issues that women from Africa and Latin America, for instance, bring to the process, and to respect the internal controversies that characterize the current feminist discourse on the ICTs.

One of these controversies concerns the choice of strategies to engender the Internet governance: gender advocacy versus direct participation in structures and discourses. Women cannot count solely on their respective national governments to advocate the necessary gender sensitivity in the Internet governance fora (although in some cases these are represented by women-officials or experts). Governments are focused on the development aspects of introducing the new ICTs to their national economies (i.e. building telecom infrastructure, creating competitive markets, attracting direct investment, etc.).

As Heike Jensen, the Chair of the WSIS Gender Caucus testified, “[t]he predominance of a gender-blind and hence male-centered discussion process has made it hard to even achieve a basic commitment to women’s human rights”. Noticing the diametrically opposed ideologies underpinning the WSIS documents and



the gender advocates contributions, she concludes that, “the fight for the inclusion of gender concerns at worst has been yet another effort to squeeze ‘women’ into a fundamentally flawed development scheme” (Jensen, 2005a).

The WSIS Gender Caucus demonstrated what organizational and discursive tools should be used in order to generate initiative and consensus on policy issues among diverse women’s groups. Despite the general dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of women’s participation in the WSIS process, there was recognition of the political potential of this proactive strategy, as compared to relying solely on the representation mechanism. Overall, the WSIS Gender Caucus provided a site for women to extend further the process of constituting their social relations with the new technology to the global level.

At the 2006 IGF, this process continued, but whatever gender-specific concerns reached the plenary sessions they were packaged as the “key concerns for civil society actors”. Apparently, the women advocates shared the liberal feminist ideal of equality and they did not feel like autonomous stakeholder group. Hence, the focus of their participation was on “how to advance the human rights and development agenda and... narrow the digital divide for women, for the differently abled, for developing countries and for the poor generally” (Natasha Primo; IGF, “Opening Ceremony”, p. 13).

Women were presented, in general, as a disadvantaged social group in need of help by governments and businesses. A more effective way, I would propose, is to delineate their specific concerns from a position of being an important stakeholder group, which should be recognized as a partner in the collaborative process. The advocate for disabled people at the forum, for instance, provided an example of how a marginalized group should be reconstituted in the new regime of regulation. Sylvia Caras, an ICT expert for the International Disability Alliance, insisted on people with disabilities becoming “included stakeholders in this development process” (IGF, “Diversity Session”, p. 27).

### **CONSTRUCTING WOMEN’S IDENTITY AS A STAKEHOLDER GROUP**

From the overview of the women-advocates’ politics at the WSIS and IGF it becomes clear that there were plenty of organizational activities directed towards fusing energies in coalitions and speaking out about women’s concerns in building the

Information Society. Yet, there are legitimate worries that those voices were marginalized and the issues raised by the women NGOs were not included in the agenda.

I propose here that, at the global level, the liberal-feminist strategy of incorporating women's concerns in the broad civil society agenda of protecting human rights needs to be reconsidered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was a successful activist strategy in the 1980s and 1990s, when the intergovernmental arena was just opening for consultations with businesses and the civil society. Today, as the Internet governance case demonstrates, multistakeholderism is becoming the consensual mode of global governance. We are witnessing a 'quite revolution' in power distribution, where governments assume the status of only one of the stakeholders participating in the policymaking process. I argue that women constituencies around the world must learn how to participate as equals in the open deliberations, assume responsibility for well-researched policy proposals, and transfer the creative energy accumulated through local initiatives and experience to the global forums.

In the development of the Internet Society regulatory environment, women are a key stakeholder group that is affected by the national policies of introducing new ICTs. Conversely, their education and income levels affect the adoption rates and paths of these technologies, due to the sheer fact that women constitute more than half of the world's population. Yet, the level of poverty in the developing and developed countries alike is higher among women.

As suggested in the literature, in order to be perceived and recognized as a legitimate stakeholder in a collaborative process, a social group is expected to have developed a shared sense of its stake in the process. As a certain level of technical competence is required for participation in the Internet governance arena, women's organizations are still struggling with reaching consensus on and clearly articulating their stake. This explains, perhaps, the liberal-feminist strategy of fighting for inclusion under the umbrella of civil society. Hence, building competencies and proving women organizations' capacity to be constructive stakeholders in the 'shared power' process emerges as a pressing prerequisite.

A collaborative policy-development process is about negotiating values. Is the Internet, and the Information Society for that matter, about globalizing transactions and markets, or it is about closing the 'digital divide'? If that is the bottom line of the current public debate in Internet governance, then women should acquire their rightful

place as a key stakeholder, able to advance the vision of the Internet as a collective good.

Such a strategy could be substantiated by taking on the following responsibilities:

1/ formulating the diverse stakes using a language that the policymakers understand (regrettably, these are the market language and logic);

2/ requiring particular representative status in leadership and participatory structures;

3/ requesting accountability mechanisms and procedures in global policymaking bodies (for instance, one of the IGF's prerogatives could be to make national, regional, international and global bodies accountable to the diversity of stakeholders); and, finally,

4/ consolidating their negotiation power in interrelated collaborative networks in order to produce consensus recommendations.

Indeed, by creating a collective identity of a key stakeholder in Internet governance, women's organizations will be able to convince governments and businesses of the validity of a gender perspective in the policy making process. By sensitising the process to gender, they would be able to effectively make representatives from governments and corporations listen to the concerns and requirements of the world's women.

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