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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published
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What we talk about when we talk about gender

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Introduction

What we talk about when we talk about gender. The title of this chapter is a riff on US novelist Raymond Carver's landmark short story, "What we talk about when we talk about love".[1] It applies to gender and internet governance simply because more than 20 years after this discourse first emerged, there is still not enough clarity on what it's *really* about.

Is it about bringing more women's voices and perspectives into internet governance? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that). Is it about bringing more women online or bridging the gender gap in access to information and communications technologies (ICTs)? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that). Is it about preventing gendered online abuse, harassment and violence? Yes, of course. (But it's about much more than that too).

And is it only about women? (No. It's about all genders, particularly those on the lower rungs of the Power Ladder).

In this paper, we'll go back and forth, between "time past and time present",[2] to track "gender" at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) – and all that it must come to mean at this point of time, if it is, philosophically and practically speaking, to mean anything at all.

Time past: A foot in the door

The question of gendering internet governance surfaced right after the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989. The 1990s was the era of the big United Nations (UN) conferences: Vienna on human rights, Cairo on population, Beijing on women's rights. Beijing – or the Fourth World Conference on Women – was the first to recognise the links between women's empowerment, gender equality and ICTs (as they were then called). Writes researcher Katerina Fialova of those heady beginnings:

Fifteen years ago, a small but determined group of women's rights and media/ICT activists fought to include media and ICTs as one of the 12 critical areas of concern in the fourth UN World Conference on Women Beijing Platform for Action. Remarkably visionary for its time, the text, binding on all governments, called for the universal recognition of the rights of all women to participate in and "have access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication."[3]

Enabling women to access the internet is one thing. Enabling women to access the tables at which power sits, where decisions on the internet are made, is another. It's the glass ceiling in governance. As the Beijing Declaration noted:

More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. [...] Women therefore need to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of the new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact.[4]

But how was this to be done in practice? By consciously aiming for gender balance in all decision-making bodies, be they public or private, decision-making or advisory. As Beijing declared, and as a fundamental document on internet governance went on to say a few years later: "Gender balance should be considered a fundamental principle with the aim of achieving an equal representation of women and men at all levels."[5]

Easier said than done. And once again, what about all those who aren't men or women? How were they to be represented? If that was one conceptual barrier, there were others too. To begin with, many in

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1   Carver, R. (1981). *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love: Stories*. New York: Knopf.

2   Eliot, T. S. (1943). Burnt Norton. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt.

3   Fialova, K. (2010, 7 October). Looking for gender in the IGF agenda. *GenderIT.org*. https://www.genderit.org/editorial/looking-gender-igf-agenda

4   https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media.htm

5   Working Group on Internet Governance. (2005). *Report of the Working Group on Internet Governance*. https://www.wgig.org/docs/WGIGREPORT.pdf

the internet governance space couldn't understand why this was even a need. Writes researcher Dafne Plou in the pioneering anthology, *Critically Absent*:

> One of the first questions that arises when promoting women's participation in the decision-making of development policies on the internet and communications in cyberspace is, "Why should women be interested in these topics? What does the world of virtual communications have to do with women's rights and needs at present?"[6]

The same question was simultaneously being asked in women's rights spaces. Technology was still too new, too shiny, too distant. It felt alien and unfamiliar, worlds away from grassroots struggles for gender equality. This feeling of tech being a separate silo is still present in women's rights spaces. There's still a disjuncture between "digital lives" (or how we live, use and breathe technology) and "digital rights" (or how we think of our rights in that faraway land). We may be users of the internet, but do we see ourselves as players – or actors – in the spaces in which the internet is created, shaped and developed? That is also the question.

Researcher Anja Kovacs records a charming anecdotal account of this disjuncture, albeit at a later point in time. Writes Kovacs:

> In October 2011, I had the privilege of being part of a national consultation on the Indian women's movement and technology. The meeting brought together seasoned feminists – all experts in the broad area of gender, science and technology – from all over the country. But when I asked how many people in the room had heard of "internet governance" and had some sense of what it might mean, only two of the over twenty participants raised their hand. When I then asked how many of them were internet users, everybody burst into laughter: they all were. This short interaction clearly brought out the lack of engagement of the women in the room with internet governance (as well as their good humour in acknowledging this).[7]

Between time past and time present: The women are in the room

Let's go back and forth in time to the IGF, one of the spaces where internet governance is actively gendered. And increasingly queered, as diverse sexual orientations and gender identities enter this space. Set up by the UN, the IGF is a global multistakeholder platform where internet policy issues are discussed.

Dataveillance. Internet shutdowns. Socially relevant algorithms. These are just three of the hot potatoes that will be discussed at IGF 2017 in Geneva. And while what's discussed is not binding, it does shape thinking around these issues. It does influence. It does help decide. Which is what governance is all about.

Almost 30% of the participants at the first IGF (Athens, 2006) were women. It's unlikely there were persons of different gender identities present, and if they were, they weren't counted. The counting started in earnest only in 2011, when APC's Women's Rights Programme introduced the Gender Report Card[8] into the IGF. The cards – which measure the number of women panellists and moderators and gender mentions per session – are now officially part of the IGF. Every workshop must report against these indicators. The cards have also seeped into the Asia Pacific Regional IGF and the African IGF, where volunteers are recording gender balance at different sessions.

What Table 1 shows is this: women may no longer be critically absent in internet governance, but "gender" is still not enough of a presence. Which almost begs the question: Is representation a meaningful yardstick? Being in the room is, of course, a necessary first step. But as Egyptian activist Yara Sallam wrote after the 2012 IGF: "Formal representation is not the aim, but the substantive inclusion of the expertise of women."[9] In other words, representation is the *means,* integrating gender perspectives is the *end.* Although given the endless struggle to change "manels" into panels, representation can sometimes feel like an end in itself.

Let's go to IGF 2012 held in Baku, which was the first IGF to host a main session on gender. As @GenderItorg tweeted: "How long does it take to get women's rights issues to main session at the IGF? SEVEN!" But as @nighatdad from Pakistan tweeted: "No woman speaker in opening ceremony of #IGF12

6   Sabanes Plou, D. (2012). Women and ICT policies: The commitment to take on new debates and challenges. In Association for Progressive Communications, *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*. https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/critically_absent.pdf

7   Kovacs, A. (2012). The Internet, democracy and the feminist movement. In Association for Progressive Communications, *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*. https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/critically_absent.pdf

8   https://www.genderit.org/category/tags/gender-report-card

9   Sallam, Y. (2012, 8 November). Again, representation not reflecting participation. *GenderIT.org*. https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/again-representation-not-reflecting-participation

TABLE 1.				
What do the global IGF gender report cards show?				
Year	How many workshops reported	% of women panellists	% of women moderators	Gender mentions in reported sessions
2011	16	46%	Not counted	Gender was the main theme in one session and not seen as relevant for 70% of sessions
2015	107	37%	35%	Gender was a key theme in two workshops and mentioned in 20 workshops

#FAIL." And as Bosnia's Valentina Pellizzer said in an interview: "This is the first time there was a main session on gender, but the opening was like going back in time 20 years. The speakers were mainly men, white and over 60, but there were two women, who were both very refreshing."[10]

If representation – or gender balance – is a pathway to bring women into the room, bringing gender into every discussion is a way to place this at the centre of the room. But wait, let's first look at the room itself. Why is it that mainly women attend any IGF session with a gender tag? As Smita Vanniyar from India wrote in a blog post on IGF 2016, held in Guadalajara: "Whenever and wherever gender is spoken about, it is often seen as a 'women's issue', when in fact that that isn't the case at all."[11]

Now let's look at what's inside these rooms. Cybersecurity. Privacy. The right to be forgotten. Internet infrastructure. Are we talking about gender in relation to them? Not really. Are we recognising that there's no such thing as a "neutral" or "genderless" user, that users come not just in numerous genders, but from different castes, classes, abilities and languages? Only when we're talking access or online violence. Gender is still in the corner of many rooms at the IGF, politely listened to, but largely ignored. As researcher Avri Doria writes: "[G]ender aspects of issues are not recognised and don't fit into the general world view of most [...] IGF participants."[12]

In other words, we remain, poetically and practically, somewhat stuck – between time past and time present. As the poet TS Eliot wrote in the presciently named "The Hollow Men"*:*

> "Between the idea
> And the reality
> [...]
> Falls the Shadow."

Time future: Where do we go from here?

I started going to the IGF in 2013, when the Forum was held in Bali. As I wrote later:

> Gender was there – but with what Fatimi Mernissi, the feminist Moroccan writer who passed away recently, might have called a mild sense of trespass. Somewhat tentative, unsure of her place, emerging in bits and pieces, most vocally in protests around Miss Internet Bali.[13]

In 2014, after attending the IGF in Istanbul, I wrote that "gender spoke louder and in many more places, but had yet to come into her own." But in 2015, at Joao Pessoa, I felt a quiet sense of satisfaction. Many more women were speakers, moderators, participants. The Dynamic Coalition on Gender and Internet Governance was working on a sexual harassment policy for the forum. Gender was everywhere. As I wrote then about our collective efforts:

> Years and years of untiring – and pioneering work – visibly paid off. Critical mass was achieved. Gender came into her own. Not just in dedicated sessions, but here, there, everywhere: in hallways, in side-conversations, in main sessions, in places expected and unexpected.[14]

Nowhere was this more in evidence than at the historic session on LGBT rights; historic because it was the first time a full IGF session was dedicated to

10 Randhawa, S. (2012, 22 November). Women at the IGF: Now we need to mainstream gender. *GenderIT.org*. https://www.genderit.org/node/3710

11 Smita. (2017, 18 January). Defining their place: Gender at the Internet Governance Forum 2016. *GenderIT.org*. https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/gender-internet-governance-forum-2016

12 Doria, A. (2012). Internet governance and gender issues. In Association for Progressive Communications, *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*. https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/critically_absent.pdf

13 Datta, B. (2015, 21 December). Finding her place: Gender at the 10th IGF. *GenderIT.org*. https://www.genderit.org/editorial/finding-her-place-gender-10th-igf

14 Ibid.

LGBT rights. It took 10 IGFs to get here, but so what? "Queer liberation starts by telling our own stories, which we were told are not worthy of telling," said one speaker. Each story brought new questions into the room, into internet governance: How can we ensure that *all* our stories can be freely told online, including those that are sexual? How do we ensure we have the privacy and anonymity we need to express ourselves online? And how do we ensure that governments don't conflate our sexual stories and expressions with porn – and ban or block them? As I spoke about these issues, I marvelled at how sexuality had crept in with gender. Trespassing in the nude, Mernissi might have said, fully aware of the irony.

Time in other spaces: Gender in waiting

In the last three years, I've also attended the regional IGF in Asia, or APrIGF, as it's called. The regional and national IGFs are much smaller than the global one, and so is gender's footprint. But they have one big advantage: they're closer to home, closer to the issues, the people. Where gender is concerned, they have the potential to turn reality on its head, not by *following* the global IGF, but by establishing their own homegrown patterns.

The global IGF has a Dynamic Coalition on Gender and Internet Governance, which focuses (or forces) annual attention to this issue. What's to stop the regional IGFs from creating their own versions – or national IGFs from proactively leveraging the economies of geography? Imagine a national IGF where it's not just the usual suspects who are talking about gender – but where bottom-up issues bubble up into the cauldron of governance. Because a much wider range of individuals across the class, ability and gender spectrum – *dalit,*[15] rural, tribal,

disabled – are in the room: forcing attention to rainbow struggles and stories, pounding polite rhetoric with rooted realities.

Imagine an IGF that's a sea of tongues, a tower of Babel, a *khichdi*[16] of language grammar meaning that also makes sense – to the "governed". That's what I think about when I think about gender.

Conclusion

All said and done, the IGFs – global, regional, national – still leave me with a mild sense of unease. I sense shadowy presences outside the conference rooms, waiting to enter, but not quite at home in the techno-babble. Where are trans, disabled and intersex bodies in these spaces? Critically absent. (And how long can we keep asking this question before it shapes itself into an answer?). What does the IGF mean to the poorest woman and her rights, as Anita Gurumurthy searchingly asked in the early days of 2008?[17] (And when will we understand this question to mean much more than access?) And whose internet is it anyway, as the late great Heike Jensen once asked?[18]

Ultimately, gender at the IGF is not just about bringing more women into the room. Nor is it about placing gender (devoid of all other identities) at the heart of governance. No. It's about much, much more. It's about chipping away at the deeply entrenched power grid underlying internet governance. About dislodging the privilege from where decisions around the internet continue to be made. About widening the picture frame by bringing into it new lives, realities and perspectives.

As the Nobel Prize-winning poet Wislawa Szymborska wrote, in an entirely different context:

"It's a big meadow. How much grass for each one?"

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15 A member of the lowest caste in India.

16 Khichdi is an Indian dish where rice and dal are mixed up, mixed up being the operative meaning. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khichdi

17 Gurumurthy, A. (2008). IGF 2008 - Anita Gurumurthy's intervention at the closing ceremony. *IT for Change*. https://www.itforchange.net/IGF2008_closing

18 Jensen, H. (2013). Whose internet is it anyway? Shaping the internet – feminist voices in governance decision making. In Finlay, A. (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2013: Women's rights, gender and ICTs*. https://giswatch.org/institutional-overview/womens-rights-gender/whose-internet-it-anyway-shaping-internet-feminist-voice

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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