



EROTICS: An Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet

Literature Review

**For
Association for Progressive Communications
Women's Networking Support Program**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1984, 'cyberspace' was science fiction. William Gibson who first coined the word described it in his novel *Neuromancer* as:

“a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding” (1984: 69).

Twenty four years later, Gibson's words have proved eerily accurate, with cyberspace becoming a science fact and an integral part of many peoples' everyday lives. From under 100,000 connections in 1990 to more than 36 million in 1998 (UNDP 1999: 58), the internet has one of the fastest growth capacities of any other technology. Yet, for all the things it has made possible, the internet's use is embedded in social, political, economic and cultural contexts. “The internet is not a new world,” says Marjorie Kibby, “It has been constructed around existing social discourses and reflects the relations of [gendered] power that exist in the off-line world” (2001b).

At the same time, the internet also does affect and influence these contexts and the off-line world at many levels. Carolyn Marvin once wrote,

“...the focus of communication has shifted from the instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation and knowledge with whatever resources are available. New media intrude on these negotiations by providing new platforms on which old groups confront each other. Old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances.” (1990: 5).

Marvin was talking about the invention and social use of the telephone in the early 20th century. As the telephone was, the internet has been charged with disrupting social relations and unsettling customary ways of dividing the private person and the family from the more public setting of the community. The internet affects or has the potential to affect other aspects of life, and challenge the status quo. It is an 'instrument', but it also creates 'drama'.

a) Why this review? Censorship, sexuality and the internet

Over the last decade, there have been increasing incidences of censorship and efforts at content regulation on the internet, especially related to sex and sexuality. Technological innovations and sex have been entwined well before the arrival of the internet; as Marvin's work shows, telephones in people's homes in the 19th and 20th centuries meant that women in Western societies, who had to be chaperoned when meeting male strangers and suitors, could now in fact talk to them in private. Klein similarly describes the many ways in which the most everyday technological innovation has had some connection to sexual values, norms and conduct (1999). The proliferation of sexual content on the internet and the considerable size of the pornography market online has been of great concern to both the far-Right and to certain groups of feminists, with some going so far as to claim that the "internet would go back to being a bunch of scientists discussing geek stuff in email" if the pornography industry were made illegal or taken off the internet completely (Hughes 2000). While there can be little doubt of the size of the adult sex industry online, the internet has also been used to express and explore a range of sexual experiences, relationships and content that cannot be considered 'pornographic'.

Organizing for sexual rights, information on sexual health, self-expressions of sexuality, exploration of sexualities, networks on addressing sexual violence, reproductive health, contraception, critical spaces for sex education of young people in environments where discussing sex is taboo – these are all also part of the basket of 'sexual content' on the internet and have been crucial to the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and sexuality rights. However little attention is given to this aspect of sex on the internet, with debates remaining confined to the moral damage of pornography and the protection of children from internet pedophilia. The latter has been of special concern in the West, prompting governments to ban or block sites that appear to default on standards of what is 'acceptable' sexual content; software development companies are ready to support this by creating filtering software parents and schools can use to monitor internet usage by young people.

Most recently, British servers blocked access to the site of the rock band, The Scorpions, without any explanation, because a nude figure on one of their album covers raised public alarm as well as responses from communication rights activists (Footman 2008). This sort of knee jerk reaction alerts us to how the fear of 'sexual content on the internet' is being interpreted in the everyday, and resulting in critical violations of freedom of expression and moving towards autocratic, unaccountable, irrational censorship. Perhaps the most widely reported issue regarding ICTs in China has been the issue of state-censorship and the concurrent growth of an internet-based public sphere in China (Yang 2003). News reports discuss how women sex-bloggers, most famously Mu Zimei, were shut down by the

government (Chien 2005; Rosen 2004). Abou-Alsamh (2006) writes in the Christian Science Monitor that 'Saudi Eve', a female blogger from Saudi Arabia, had her blog blocked by the state for discussing a romantic escapade and God in the same post. "Jo" of www.classic-diva.blogspot.com says she was stopped from using the internet at home after her conservative brothers were suspicious of her spending so much time online. It comes as somewhat of a surprise that in the United States as well women are being intimidated, harassed and threatened for voicing their opinions on their blogs (Nakashima 2007). Many countries, especially in West Asia where a strongly invasive form of social censorship is prevalent, block content related to pornography, homosexuality, dating and provocative attire. Some of these countries also censor topics considered sensitive or forbidden under Islam, including web sites that feature nudity, even if in a non-erotic context¹. A report on the state of censorship in Iran states, "The main words subject to censorship in Iran are currently English words related to sex, sexuality, and birth - even if used in literature, mythology, medicine, etc. Along with the porn sites, many sites related to sexuality and sexual education are also censored²." Countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey have been active in debates concerning regulation of sexual content on the internet (usually termed as 'harmful'), with Turkey passing a law recently on regulating such 'offensive' sites (Schleifer 2008). As a result, various sites including YouTube, have been blocked, leading to an outcry from communication rights activists in the country and a call to repeal what is turning out to be a repressive and undemocratic law (Ben Gharbia 2008; Mansour 2008)

While concerns around content regulation are not limited to the South, there is a distinct sort of difference in the nature of censorship in locations around the globe. In the North censorship relates to concerns of sexual excess, most notably related to pornography and sexual content related to children. In the South the struggles around censorship tend to focus on the tension between information flows and culture; in developing countries of the South, being as many are in moments of transition and uneven development, the internet is seen as a threat to a certain fixed idea of what 'culture' is – whether it is related to fears around how children as the 'future of the nation' are developing through too much online exposure³, or whether it is about the social and cultural appropriation of women's sexual and emotional spaces. In all cases, Northern and Southern, the most marginal communities continue to be further marginalized. Moreover, in between these extreme responses there

¹ See <http://map.opennet.net/filtering-soc.html> for more information

² Access is denied: a report on the status of the internet in Iran: <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=r&x=91926>; See also testimony of Nadine Moawad_MEEM, <http://www.meemgroup.org/>, in Lebanon about how they use internet for organizing underground movement of LBTQ women <http://www.radiofeminista.org/nov08/audios/nadine.mp3>

³ Some recent research studies from the 2008 issues of the journal *CyberPsychology & Behaviour* include titles from Korea, Hong Kong and China such as: "Do Aggressive People Play Violent Computer Games in a More Aggressive Way? Individual Difference and Idiosyncratic Game-Playing Experience", "Personality Traits and Life Satisfaction among Online Game Players", "Subjective Well-Being: Evidence from the Different Personality Traits of Online Game Teenager Players", "The Association between Internet Addiction and Problematic Alcohol Use in Adolescents: The Problem Behaviour Model.

are a multitude of issues that fall through the cracks, one of the most notable being cyber-violence against women. Increased surveillance and filtering of content aimed to 'protect' children or 'culture' can result in the stifling of women's voices and the exposure of women and girls to online violence. The balance between agency and exploitation is continually fraught.

Set against the backdrop of this environment of censorship and anxiety about sexual content on the internet, this review is part of an effort to engage with and understand these trends; and seek out in a systematic and verifiable manner equally significant ways in which the internet enables (or not) women to express themselves and enhance their access to sexual information, pleasure, networks and support systems. Most importantly, this review is grounded in the rights framework, especially the protection, promotion and fulfilment of two sets of rights critical to addressing debates around censorship – sexuality rights and communication rights.

b) The Rights Framework: Some Key Terms and Positions

Sexuality: The World Health Organization has a holistic definition that captures the physical, social and emotive aspects of sexuality: 'human sexuality' is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.

'Sexuality is an integral part of every human being. It is a complex and rich terrain that includes identity formation, ideas and ownership of the self, behaviour, relationship-building and performativity, grounded in embodiment. Sexuality is embedded and inter-woven with other axes of identities such as gender and ethnicity, and constitutes a central idea where social, cultural, economic and political delineations are constructed.⁴

Sexuality Rights: Following from this definition accessed through the same WHO resources, sexual rights embrace human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus statements. They include the right of all persons, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, to:

- the highest attainable standard of sexual health, including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
- seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality;
- sexuality education;
- respect for bodily integrity;

⁴ Source: <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/gender/sexualhealth.html>

- choose their partner;
- decide to be sexually active or not;
- consensual sexual relations;
- consensual marriage;
- decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and
- pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

We use these particular outlines as they provide a broad framework within which to position sexuality rights, particularly the right to be free of violence and disease, to experience and pursue pleasure and relationships consensually. These definitions are also easily applicable to the context of ICTs and the internet.

However, sexuality rights are complex and contested issues. For example, for feminists sexual rights may tend to focus on rights to safety, bodily integrity, sexual self-definition, agency and pleasure; the LGBTQ and disability rights movements are concerned with social and economic rights such as rights to marriage and relationships, and the consumption of ‘sexual commodities’ whose very existence could be inflammatory to some feminist positions, most notably on pornography and prostitution. Moreover, the issue of consent consistently crops up, with certain organizations in the North⁵ claiming that the right to sexual self determination needs to be extended to children as well, coming up against child-protectionist positions that seek to restrict young people’s access to sexual content. These debates are rarely resolved easily, but such a rights framework can provide a broad paradigm within which to address context-specific situations of restrictions of rights.

Communication Rights: The Internet Rights Charter by the Association for Progressive Communications⁶ describes the rights to communication in terms of ICTs and the internet, and the internet as a space for “social mobilization and development, resistance to injustices and expression of differences and creativity” despite the fact that the process of globalization, to which the internet is central, has yielded uneven results and exacerbated social and economic inequalities. Organized around five thematic areas, their definition calls for the protection and respect of the following rights:

- The right of men and women of differing backgrounds, languages, locations and abilities to affordable, public access to the internet and to the skills and infrastructure required to access it’s power, and the benefits for social justice and development it can contribute to

⁵ See Diane Richardson (2000: 127-129) for how different ideological/community groups contest issues of rights and freedoms and the implications for sexual citizenship.

⁶ The full text of this charter is available at <http://rights.apc.org/charter.shtml#6>

- The right to freedom of expression, freedom from censorship and the right to online protest
- The right to knowledge, freedom of access to information and access to publicly funded information
- The right to shared and open flows of information, knowledge and culture, including free and open source software that can create local innovations, open technical standards that make the internet more inclusive and the right to convergent media platforms.
- The right to freedom from surveillance and the right to encryption and to privacy
- The right to internet governance that is transparent, open, accessible, with decentralized and collaborative inter-operability
- The rights to awareness and information about rights and the right to recourse in case of rights violations

Applicable to all forms of media and communications, this definition addresses the critical issues of access as well as safety and to diversity and information on the internet and ICTs. A study of the internet inevitably confronts the intersection of the conflicted enjoyment of the rights to sexuality and to communication. This is often described in terms of one person's sexual right being considered 'harmful' to another. This review recognizes that the conceptualization of 'rights' is not neutral particularly in an area like the internet where issues of rights and governance are in a process of negotiation and formulation. What becomes relevant is that notions of rights are based on understandings of what 'harm' and 'violation' are, often in narrow ways, without an appreciation for the wider universe of violations that spaces like the internet facilitate. The local realities that exert control over constructions of harm and violence are also critical towards understanding how they affect sexuality and communication rights. In this review, women's rights to express and enjoy their sexualities, form relationships and experience pleasure, in the absence of harm and violence, are a guiding principle in assessing the strength, quality and inclusion of information/research.

c) About this review: methodology, limitations and structure

This review precedes an 'Exploratory Research project On Sexuality and The Internet' ("EROTICS") by the Women's Networking Support Program of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC-WNSP). The project aims to conduct cross-country research that will respond to the question: How may the emerging debates and growing practices of regulation of online content either impede or facilitate different ways women use the internet, and how does it impact their sexual expression, sexualities and, sexual health practices, and the assertion of their sexual rights. Expressed differently: In what ways

do internet and ICT policy shape the sexual practices of women living in different socio-political, economic and cultural contexts⁷?

The complex nature of the topic means that the research must tackle two related but different directions:

- Online practices and internet use in select digital spaces, and how they affect notions of sexuality rights in society at large.
- The impact of regulatory policies and censorship practices on sexualities, sexual health and sexual rights.

The internet is only one of many tools to communicate, exchange, produce, disseminate or transform information but few of us acknowledge other aspects of the internet – spaces it creates and discourses it shapes - and few act to protect this unique space, to monitor and engage with policies and debates which may affect it's uses. This review is an attempt in this direction.

This review describes and assesses the status of current writing and research on sexuality, the internet and women. It pays attention to the directions provided by feminist theoreticians, researchers and writers since the two year long research study that is to follow this review is based on feminist perspectives and methodologies. We place a special emphasis on feminist perspectives on what technologies in general, and the internet in particular, mean to and for the construction of gender and women's lives; the reality that much of this writing has originated from within Northern academia is obvious, and therefore has limitations in applicability. While 'women' are the population this review primarily looks at, 'gender' really is the political and conceptual point of our discussions; so, men's actual use of the internet is not a focus here whereas masculinities have been discussed in the context of understanding questions around gender and technology. This review also considers the political-economic dimensions of writing related to the internet and sexuality recognizing the impact of global flows, formations, policies and economic realities.

This review leans towards professional and academic writing for a sense of rigour that it connotes, and since there are clear theoretical frameworks that they operate from. Journalistic and popular writing have been referred to as well, although these are included more as points of reference in discussions of current affairs and issues related to internet use. A range of material has been accessed to provide a balanced and holistic overview of an issue – from strongly political-economic and socialist-feminist positions to a cultural studies approach, lay writing, NGO, women's rights and development perspectives.

⁷ See Appendix 1 for a thematic matrix developed by APC and the authors to guide the design of this review

Multiple approaches have been adopted depending on thematic areas and the ways in which these themes have been discussed⁸.

Published academic material was accessed from the databases of three universities in the United States and in England, and the online journal content provided free for the month of October 2008 by Sage Publishers⁹. Midway through this review we also sent out emails to a large number of friends and colleagues asking for their suggestions and inputs to specific online spaces that offered 'different' ways of being and experiencing sex and sexuality. Our aim was to see if there were trends/practices that were not being reported in either the popular writing about the internet or in academic writing and look into what a certain group of people were accessing, aside from online pornography. This exercise yielded some interesting results, however mostly leading us to blogs, personal home pages and variations of existing themes already discussed in the existing literature¹⁰.

With the broad title 'sexuality, the internet and women', this review meets a considerable challenge of taking on a wealth of literature as well as strongly contested cultural, intellectual, political and personal spaces and positions. This review has been restricted by the breadth of this field and the resources and time available. A review like this is also strongly interdisciplinary, and though we have stretched our canvas to include journals from the fields of psychology, media studies, gender studies, sociology and development studies, we are aware that this review is limited in terms of exploring any one disciplinary position in-depth. Additionally, considering that the focus is global, there is the inevitability of having missed something relevant from a particular part of the world. Research on gender, women, sexuality and internet is concentrated in the academic centres of North America, Australia and Western Europe. This is hardly surprising that most research on women's internet use and online practices comes from those regions where access to the internet is considerable and the fabric of everyday life is largely virtual. Thus, countries in Western Europe and in North America, in Korea, China and Japan are the preferred sites for the rich and varied academic study of internet behaviour¹¹. Given the limitations posed by time, and the fact that the majority of material on the Internet is in English (and this is a point in itself), we have looked at literature only in the English language. At this stage

8 For example, online games and the gaming industry are an area that are widely discussed in journalism, professional forums and in academia, but each of these adopts a different position on gaming. Academic studies explore the gendered and sexual dimensions, experiences, and impacts of game-playing on women, whereas journalistic writing either reports on games, or seeks to explore markets for gaming. The tension between the two is obviously considerable, since feminist-academic positions are concerned with how gaming shapes and is shaped by the constructions of gender, whereas a professional body is interested in exploiting 'gender' in order to create a more viable and diverse market, with little attention to its ramifications. Similarly, within academic writing there are a range of positions; with respect to pornography and representation some may take a more abolitionist position calling for a complete ban on such material, whereas others may explore the nuances of the representations from a cultural studies perspective. We have attempted to share the range of positions on an issue, wherever possible.

9 See Appendix 2 for list of journals and web resources accessed

10 See Appendix 3 for a list of resources gathered

11 However this review is limited to English language research and has not been able to access materials published locally by feminist researchers / women's groups in China, Japan and Korea.

therefore much of the literature cited in this report originates in Western academia and in development studies.

We have organized the review into three parts. Part I encompasses the theoretical and conceptual approaches to studying the internet and locating women by examining perspectives on gender, feminisms and technology. Part II looks at specific thematic areas detailed in a table prepared through successive consultations between the EROTICS project team and the authors (See Appendix 1). In this section we summarise the literature around the specific sub-themes and categories listed here and analyse the gaps and limitations in existing research, and look at useful directions and innovations to build on or replicate. Part III is the conclusion and summarizes our findings and gives some directions for the proposed cross country research study.

Part I: OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE INTERNET

1. Approaches to the internet

a) The Internet: Emancipation or Exclusion?

The notion of freedom offered by the internet is a contested issue. On the one hand it can be considered the ultimate tool of democracy, with Barnett suggesting that it “is the perfect instrument for recreating in 21st century political life, the kind of participative democracy which has not existed since Ancient Greece” (1997:194). Jones eloquently frames it saying: “Cyberspace is a repository for collective memory. It reminds us who we are, it is life as lived. It is sacred and profane, it is a workspace and a leisure space, it is a battle field and a nirvana, it is real and virtual, it is ontological, intimate, more imaginable than the public for social, political, economic and cultural interaction. Users can act as authors, public rhetoricians, statesmen, pundits.” (1997:37)

However, other positions have consistently questioned such characterization, pointing out that the internet is available only to a select few, requires not only literacy but also computer literacy, and is mostly in English. For Pinto (2006) the internet is an ideological tool that represents the elite who want to create consumers for their markets. Responding to Pinto, Ishrat Alam (2006) calls for a ‘balance sheet’ before rejecting outright the possibilities offered by the internet. Alam recalls that no technology has ever been available to all, and points out that the internet has operationalized freedom of expression in completely new ways.

Within media studies, the internet has been looked at as a possible candidate for ‘alternative and radical media’, something that has a specific kind of empowering and transformatory potential (Atton 2002). Mc Quail proposed that participation and interaction are key concepts, building on Foucault who in 1980 said alternative and radical media may be considered ‘hetero-glossic (multiple-voiced) text’ where voices are able to speak directly and ‘the Other’ can represent itself. Alternative media was that which was “citizen controlled as opposed to state or corporate controlled” (Achbar 1994) and where “radical content” came together with a process where media production was in the hands of ordinary people. It is this idea of the internet as an emancipatory medium that can be a platform for multiple voices, which lies at the core of internet rights activism. Radical internet right activists believe, like John Perry Barlow famously stated in a seminal text

called *The Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, 'You have no sovereignty where we gather... cyberspace does not lie within your borders.' Their assertion is that with the internet, the government may rule over their bodies but not over their free minds in the realm of cyberspace (Barlow, 1996).

Andrew Ross (1998) critiques the exalted position of cyberspace highlighting two major issues. One is the material basis of cyberspace, which thousands of people work at to keep going in an economy of low-wage subcontracting that depends on young, cheap labour. In the past decade these 'manufacturing lofts' have shifted their physical location from the global North to the South, much like many other industries have (Klein 2000). Secondly, Ross illustrates that the military and government have never really withdrawn their dominance in this field by showing how service providers and the government are connected through vested interests, and how service providers continue to make their most revenue from government and intelligence contracts. Thus the idea that the internet really belongs to or is a space for people or for democracy has to be tempered by the dominance of global political economic networks and systems.

b) ICT 4 Development

"According to March 2008 statistics only 3.6% of internet users in the world were from Africa. Asia contributed to 37.6% of internet users globally, but this percentage is inflated by large numbers of users from China. The number of fixed lines has not increased significantly, and in some cases has even shrunk. And, in addition to this, a new divide is emerging: the broadband (or high speed internet) divide." (APC 2008b). With the privatization of telecommunications and the liberalization of markets, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) continue to be accessible to those who are more privileged, and marginalize those who have always been excluded, and are now the 'digitally excluded.'

In order to address such divides, ICTs are used to further social justice, political participation, free speech and self expression and democratic human development (APC 2008a). 'ICTs for Development' (ICT4D) has now become a legitimate area of the professional development discourse, one that is necessarily operationalized in Southern contexts of irregular and hampered development, although poor and marginalized communities in the North are also sites of ICT4D initiatives¹². ICT4D programs take on many different forms and can be integrated within state systems, public services, community and social life, for poverty reduction programs, to providing solutions for farmers, to improving and enhancing school based education, health care, to organizing

¹² For example, see Mehra, Merkel and Bishop (2004): The internet for empowerment of minority and marginalized users, *New Media & Society*, vol 6(6), 781-802.

and monitoring local governance and civic processes¹³. With the democratization of technology and with greater access to the technological tools required to harness the power of the internet, ICT4D aims to create participatory spaces offering users greater involvement in the production and management of online technologies, content and processes.

ICT4D is a thriving practice in the African context for the obvious reason that many African communities, and women in particular, live in deep poverty and with limited access to even the most basic rights and resources (Kwake et al 2006; Kole 2001). Access to and uses of ICTs in Africa is hampered by a number of factors most notably poor infrastructure such as erratic electricity supply, uneven opportunities to access technologies, limited education and exposure, with women further disadvantaged by gender-disparities in access to resources and opportunities. ICT4D therefore has to be intrinsically linked to women's lives, as Ellen Kole says, "we cannot see internetworking [sic] separate from the struggle for women's advancement" (2001: 168). However, introducing ICTs into everyday life is met with resistance since basic survival needs for many are not being met, and the debate is positioned in terms of the 'computers' versus 'survival' formulation. This position exemplifies the debate on what sort of development is *more* essential to individuals and communities.

ICT4D therefore begs the question what 'development' includes and excludes. ICT4D is discussed in internationally ratified and UN-led processes such as the Millenium Development Goals. MDG #8 for example specifically includes ICTs as Target 18: to "make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications."¹⁴ The 'benefits of new technologies' are primarily related to how they can be harnessed towards poverty reduction, and thus focusing on improving systems and processes of agriculture, health, education, etc. There are also significant efforts to improve women's enrollment in science and technology studies and careers in the South (Huyer & Mitter 2003). However this approach does not necessarily take a rights based approach, nor does sexuality get discussed in Sophia Huyer's report (2003) for the Gender Advisory Board of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology in Development (UNCSTAD), even though she cites reports of ICT4D projects where 'adolescent girls use ICTs to access information and content related to reproductive health and sexuality' (10).

¹³ For information about a range of ICT4D projects, see: www.genardis.org , www.apc.org www.idrc.ca www.digitalopportunity.org

¹⁴ According to UNDP, a focus on mainstreaming ICT will effectively contribute to achievement of the MDGs, particularly those related to income poverty reduction, education, health, environment and gender equity through: creating economic opportunities & contributing to poverty reduction; managing the processes of providing basic services (e.g. healthcare, education) at lower cost and with greater coverage; facilitating access to information and the involvement of stakeholders through greater transparency and support to networking at every stage; and enhancing the capacity to measure, monitor and report progress on the goals and strategize. (Huyer & Mitter, 2003:9)

Central to this review and the EROTICS research is the point made effectively by Susan Jolly et al (2006), as to why and how sexuality is connected with development¹⁵; there is a sense that security, livelihoods and education usually comes before sexual well-being, and therefore are somehow more important to development than 'soft' issues like sexuality. When relationships are violent and unsafe, when where abortions are illegal, where arbitrary standards of female beauty are equated with character or personal success, when the right to a sexual relationship is criminalized, then how expansive and real is the definition of 'development'? Jolly and her colleagues note that the reticence of development practitioners to consider how sexuality is interwoven with development, beyond the absence of disease or violence, is now inadvertently spurred by conservative backlashes that use content regulation and censorship to limit women's access to information even further. Taking this idea of development into the ICT4D conversation and considering the potential offered by the internet implies that women's sexual rights can in fact be pursued through the spaces offered by technologies, which forms the underlying rationale and motivation for this present study and discussion.

Women in the South are deeply connected to the global political economy of ICTs as workers and producers, from the highly skilled woman programmer from South India who migrates to Silicon Valley, to the differently skilled but comparatively underpaid woman who assembles motherboards in Taiwan to the slum-dwelling teenager who learns about sexual health through an ICT project¹⁶. Micky Lee (2006) makes a succinct point of noting this and that few researchers have really examined this range of personal and socio-political realities more intensively¹⁷. Thus Southern women are positioned both as workers with the potential to contribute to the global IT enabled economy, and as recipients 'in need' of development.

Despite the proliferation of ICT4D projects across the world, there remains scepticism about the distance between the claims made of ICT4D, and the extent of social and economic inequities it addresses, suggesting that there is a need for temperance in understanding how ICTs can be best employed in development. Sreekumar T.T says of the Indian experience that ICTs are viewed as "a unique technological intervention capable of challenging traditional barriers to social change and economic development." However his paper finds that contrary to this widely held belief, "the actual experience ... provides grounds for reassessing the strategies and options of ICT deployment in rural spaces, given

15 By considering sexuality rights holistically, not just as the absence of disease or violence, but regarding pleasure as well, Jolly et al share a number of initiatives from around the world of groups and individuals who are expanding the notion of sexuality rights into the context of their overall development. Their work discusses how different aspects of everyday life are connected back to sexuality rights and issues. See http://www.ids.ac.uk/UserFiles/File/publications/policy_briefs/PB29.pdf for more on this issue and <http://www.id21.org/insights/insights75/index.html>

16 See <http://www.apdip.net/resources/case/rnd17/view> A case study of ICT-enabled life skills and sexuality education for adolescent girls in Tamil Nadu, India.

17 Micky Lee (2006) calls for a greater political-economic approach in exploring how the dynamics of the global economy affect women as producers and consumers, and how the construction of gender maintains the inequalities inherent to the existing global economic system.

the fact that the application of information technology has not in itself led to any profound transformation of the social and economic milieu of marginalized communities. Besides, the potential for the organizational as well as technical innovations that lay at the base of these interventions, remoulding micro-level practices in order to generate sustained growth in incomes and jobs, appears to be rather limited and conditioned by the historically given socio-economic milieu in which they operate.” (2007:870)

Looking at recent papers on ICT use by/for women in the global South, it appears that there is an agreement on the need to customize ICTs, encourage participation and enable communication, dialogue and feedback amongst users. Kole calls for such a different discourse of technology in addition to a feminist politics of technology. In a context of Africa where oral cultures are strong, where large Francophone and Anglophone belts co-exist, where offline is more important than online, where ‘old’ media like radio are still the most favoured and most accessible and with the linking of different forms of media and (offline) social networks, the ways in which technologies are used and adapted elsewhere cannot be expected here (2001). Micky Lee quotes Elizabeth Kole who found that when email was introduced to a particular group of Southern women, they were ‘advised’ to be more prompt in responding to emails; there is a dominant belief that the essence of the medium is efficiency which is possible only when it is constantly being checked, however these women checked their email only when they chose to go online (2006: 199-200). It is not just a question of having a computer for personal use, but also of how time and work are structured and understood by women across different global regions, and an appreciation of how to integrate ‘development’ within this. Speaking of the Latin American context Friedman makes a similar point, noting that feminist organizations felt “the encounter is richer than the email”, thus highlighting the importance of integrating ICT use in consonance with local culture, norms and history. Thus while ICT4D can possibly address a range of development issues, from blogs by women for discussions of sexuality to improving access to quality healthcare through tele-medicine in Nepal¹⁸, the key issue is how effectively and meaningfully ICTs can be integrated into people’s everyday lives.

c) Perspectives from the Social Sciences

Alongside the development initiatives by NGOs and civil society organizations, academics have been closely involved with the study of the internet. Silver describes three overlapping and linked stages in the study of the internet and cyberspace: ‘popular cyberculture’, consisting of descriptive journalism, often in the columns of magazines. The second phase builds on this and is defined as ‘cyberculture studies’: while more academic and less

¹⁸ See www.pambazuka.org/blogs/bawo/ and <http://www.apdip.net/resources/case/md49/view> as examples.

journalistic, it was marked by equally celebratory literature such as Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993) and Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1996). These texts focus on virtual communities and online identities in particular. Silver claims that we are now in a phase of 'critical cybercultural studies', characterized by a concern with contextualizing cyber-experiences and the emergence of a broader range of empirical studies of cyberworlds. Consequently, cyberculture studies are now more theoretically nuanced and more empirically based than they were in the past (2000: 860 in Kennedy 2006).

Mackenzie's and Wacjman's social shaping of technology theory illustrates how economic interests, different across social contexts, determine how technologies are developed, used and mainstreamed in society. They show how the emergence of modern technologies and corporate capitalism were developed through US military purchasing and the choices made by the State (Cockburn 1993: 32-33). This rather simplistic theory however eventually made way for Pinch's and Bijker's SCOT or 'Social Construction Of Technology approach. The SCOT approach particularly applies a sociological perspective to the content and design of technologies and the groups who control this process as a means to understand how they are mainstreamed in society. Their idea of 'interpretative flexibility' shows how scientific findings are open to more than one interpretation, and that social relations and mechanisms limit this flexibility. Technologies come to be seen and used according to the 'effective rhetoric' of certain influential social groups (33), that is, 'machines work because they have been accepted by certain groups'¹⁹ (Wacjman 2000: 450). The Actor Network Theory (ANT), by Latour and Law, considers the idea that technology and society are not separate spheres, but are enmeshed and that technology itself makes a large scale society possible. ANT controversially suggests that there are also 'non-human actors' that have agency and make social life possible: 'the machine is the spokesperson And carry the word(s) of those who invented, developed, perfected and produced them' (Callon in Wacjman 2000: 451). As Wacjman goes on to say, "the user interacts with the pre-inscribed artefact, and can challenge and renegotiate the meanings and uses of the artefact" (451).

These theoretical approaches do not look merely at the technology-object but cast their view back to the very conceptualization, testing, invention, design, re-testing, production, and marketing of the object. However these constructivist views of technology have been criticized for not accounting for groups that are consistently marginalized and excluded from technology-development networks, particularly considering that in all these networks women are present down the production line, working to actually assemble these technologies/objects but with little say in any aspect of their use/meaning-making (452-455). Additionally, constructivist theories are unable to address how gender is, and

¹⁹ This is a useful addition to feminist debates since it shows how powerful social actors are involved in the controversies, debates and meaning-making associated with certain technological artefacts, and since women are generally absent from these negotiations, the gendered dimension of technologies is ignored (451).

knowledge about what gender is, produced through technology. For example, technological prowess, power and scientific thinking are considered a part of culturally dominant ideas of Western masculinity, attributes that are highly prized, as is the control, mastery and possession of the latest technologies. It is, unsurprisingly, feminist writers who are engaging with what this means for women as producers and consumers within this context.

d) Feminism and Technology

Feminist writers and thinkers, from different historical and intellectual traditions, have approached the juncture of technology, sexuality and gender in terms of the potential for liberation (or not) from gendered inequalities. The first strand of feminist writing is about the internet-as-technology, it intellectually and politically interrogates the ways in which gender relations are reproduced through technology, and how gender identities are shaped by, and shape, technology and its uses. This is theoretical work that examines the role and place of technologies in actually liberating or further restricting the concepts of genders and sexualities. The second strand of feminist engagement is as political but focuses on addressing specific situations of rights violations: the preponderance of sexual content on the internet, most of it being the traffic in sexual images of women, situations of cyber-harassment and cyber-violence, the trafficking of women and children through the internet and a host of similarly damaging, complex and discriminatory situations. Aside from addressing violations, feminists also consider issues of women's access to ICTs and seek the adequate representation of women's issues and needs in policy-making related to ICTs.

Judy Wacjman's excellent historical paper (2007) affords a brief look at the evolution of feminist thought on gender and technology, a rich history of inquiry that attempts to address some of the issues that other social-constructivist technologies have not. During second-wave feminism the primary concerns focused on women's equal access to educational and professional access to science and technology. The idea was that if more women had access to these opportunities they would eventually permeate the institutions of technological advancement (288). Liberal feminism, at this stage, did not specifically question the nature of technology and techno-science itself nor how it could be changed. However, equal opportunities are perhaps only a part of the debate; what became apparent was that gender was implicated in the very constructions of the cultures of technology itself. The symbols of technology and masculinity are closely entwined, and usually incompatible with femininity. Socialist and radical feminisms then began to engage with the

nature of technology, with how technology and gender are both constituted and produced (289). There are two divergent strands in this thinking. A socialist approach focused on the mechanisms and technologies themselves, at the collusion of capitalist and sexual divisions of labour, the de-skilling of the workforce and the fragmentation of jobs as machines 'took over'. The effects of this on women were of concern, and there was a general resistance to the idea of technological progress itself (290).

In a similar socialist vein, researchers have also looked at the historical evolution of technologies to show that there is nothing 'natural' about their evolution. Instead Cockburn and Ormrod show that technologies – right from electricity and the microwave oven to the internet - are invented, designed and distributed by certain actors for very specific aims (1993). Their work emphasizes the gendering process in the uses and applications of technology from their very conception, testing and design, right up to their marketing and retailing. Moreover, the *construction* of who the consumer is, and the *control* of the consumer are very much a part of how technologies are made available in society (455).

Radical and cultural feminisms focused instead on what they considered the fundamental difference in women's femininity from male values embedded in the construction of Western technologies. Their suspicion of male values to control and dominate women was expressed through movements against the rise of reproductive technologies in the 1980s-1990s. They believed that such technologies were further evidence of patriarchal control of women's bodies (289). What is critical in radical feminism's construction of gender through this, which is an essentialist view, that there is something specifically and inherently 'male' and 'masculine' about the construction of technologies and that this was in contradiction to *specifically* female values of pacifism and nurturance. Both these branches of feminism had their obvious limitations by seeing women as victims of techno-science with little of their own agency. As technologies developed, so did feminist engagement with more complex issues of sexuality, gender and technology.

Box 1: Women and blogging

One of the most accessible ways for women to connect across the cyber-world, apart from email, is the blog, or web-log. Blogs are like free online diaries customizable by users to include photographs, video, music and graphics. A recent study of women in the United States reveals that 66% of women and 68% of men have blogs, but since the numbers of women in the population is greater, there are more women with blogs (Welch 2006). Women's affinity for blogging however is not new. The genres of personal writing and diary-writing have always been popular with women (in Smith 2006) and blogs are merely a digital version of this. Because blogs can remain anonymous they give women the space to write about experiences that they may not otherwise share in a public

forum, considering that women's voices are strongly policed. For this reason blogs are a critically important space for everyday women to make themselves heard²⁰. and legitimizes women's voice and power (Mitra and Watts 2002). Women's blogs therefore can challenge cultural instincts for censorship; for example, a recent news talk show on Indian television was concerned about how explicit women's blogs can be and if this is in keeping with Indian culture or not (NDTV 2008).

There are different functions that women's blogs take on depending on where they are located. Zhang (2008) looks at the popularity and growth of Chinese middle-class mothers' blogs, highlighting the links between the Chinese nation and culture and the discourse of population and the One-Child Policy in China. Her work looks at how women use blogs to demonstrate agency and voice within the social context of the regulation of gender and sexuality and the glorification of Chinese motherhood and nurturing practices. African women are also taking to blogging, supporting the creation of dialogue and discourse on African women's issues. A pilot project in Nigeria, Blogs for African Women ("BAWo")²¹ encourages young women to maintain their own blogs and the site reveals discussions and writing varying from violence and safety to young motherhood to the experiences of women in sports. Oreoluwa Somulu, the founder of BAWo finds that African women were at first not interested in accessing ICTs since they found very little content that interested them; more African women blogging fills that gap (Somulu 2007). Diasporic African women's blogs equally contribute to the dialogue on women's lives, such as BlackLooks²² that discusses social, political and economic issues that affect African women across the world. Women's blogs have been so popular that BlogHer was recently established as a yellow-pages for women bloggers to connect with each, mainstream their writing and seek guidance on how to maximize use of their web-spaces.

Women's blogging practices are not widely studied in research literature considering that the practice is fairly new, but there are some exceptions. Blogs as feminist strategy and practice, and as teaching/learning tools for women's studies are being written about (see Smith, 2006). But why and how blogs are so popular with women: is it the ability to connect with and 'consume' similar gendered realities? (Karlsson 2007). Is it the potential for intimacy such spaces offer? Catherine Driscoll makes the point, at the risk of essentializing women's 'natural' communicative-ness, that blogs can actually bring

20 Well known examples of women who have used their blogs exactly for this include China's Mu Zimei ("Sister Lotus") who posted descriptions of her sex acts, and XiaXue, who posts sexy photographs of herself along with her thoughts and social commentary (Liu 2005); Secret Diary of a Call Girl by 'Belle de Jour', started by an out-of-work woman from London eventually became a best-selling book, and more recently a TV show; in a similar manner The Compulsive Confessor by Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan from India was in the spotlight, leading to the author being commissioned for a book on the basis of the success of her blog.

21 See <http://www.pambazuka.org/blogs/bawo/> for details

22 www.blacklooks.org

credibility and currency to these gendered communications and expressions that women have (2008).

2. Gender and Technology: Theoretical Frameworks

a) Cyber Feminisms: Theory and Practice

Feminist engagement with the internet can be traced back to its troubled relationship with technology as a whole. Troubled, because technology was conceptualized and experienced as another patriarchal tool with which to dominate and control women, most prominently reproductive technologies and then followed by media technologies that invariably represented women in sexually offensive ways. It was academic Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' that muddled this relationship with machines. Perhaps the most famous feminist claim to women's space in the cyber-world is her assertion that she would rather be a cyborg rather than an eco-feminist Goddess (1985; in Wacjman 2007: 291). Instead of seeing women as victims of technology, Haraway urges women to use technology to challenge existing gender relations and create something entirely different; instead of being frightened of the effects of biotechnologies on women's bodies, Haraway believes that 'new entities' and 'new worlds' are all entirely in women's capacities now. Critical to Haraway's idea is a genderless utopia where gendered and social divisions are transcended. Haraway's theories on the essential one-ness of (wo)man and machine created a large base of feminists who began calling themselves 'cyber-feminists'. Sadie Plant (1998) similarly discussed the rise of women and machines as a revolt of 'chattel' against men-as-masters. Although this was then subsumed in the jargonized post-modernism wave that hit feminist theory at the time, it indicated a turning point in feminists' relationship with technology.

Within the realm of cyber-feminisms there are both utopian and dystopian perspectives. On a positive note, the feminist cyber-utopia of Sadie Plant valorizes the ways in which women can revolutionise society by bringing 'essentially' feminine ways of being to the better uses of technology. With digital worlds being horizontal and relying on vast networks, with the blurring of the spaces between the body and the machine, writers like Plant feel that women are well-suited to the digital age. In a related view, works such as Sherry Turkle's (1995) suggest that the internet's transformative capacity lies in the ways it allows gender categories to become reconfigured through practices such as gender swapping, cross-dressing and making up personas. The disembodied and anonymous nature of online

communication is seen as enabling the experiencing of a new sense of self, one that is significantly gender-free, fluid and de-centred (Wacjman 2000). Central to Turkle's claims based on her work in Multi User Domains (MUDS) is that the anonymity offered by the internet allows people to disguise aspects of their identities that lead to discrimination, such as race or gender, thereby creating a sense of empowerment - if we cannot see each other we cannot judge each other. Moreover, playing with identities allows users to experiment with what the 'other' is, whatever that may be (in Orgad 2005). 'Cybertopian' feminists stress the agency and control women can enjoy online in transcending their gendered and sexual realities and experimenting with new ways of being (Magnet 2007: 583)

There are however valid criticisms of these utopian-isms; for one, they tend to be essentialist, for example by constructing community-building, consensus and communication as something that women are *inherently* good at (in van Zoonen 2001:68), or that they tend to ignore the historical realities of women's experiences and bodies, realities that they continue to be mired in even as they seek out disguises and anonymity online (Magnet 2007:585). Even if the body can be escaped, markers of class/ ethnicity/ race linger on (Kennedy 2006: 589 and Magnet 2007: 588-591). Sharon Orgad also notes that caution is called for in assessing the power of online worlds to affect offline realities; even for those women who experience cyber-space as a liberating realm, it is not always clear that they translate this freedom into their offline worlds (2005). Moreover, trafficking, violence, the traffic in women's images and bodies are all-too-real threats for many women. Feminists like Kath Albury question the supposed benefits of cyberspace as liberatory in terms of issues like pornography, but not from a perspective of morality, instead from a perspective of ethics. Shoshanna Magnet clearly sums up Albury's perspective:

“...she asserts that morality is not a helpful framework from which to examine online pornography. It imposes a simplistic binary of 'good' versus 'bad' representations of sexuality. Instead, Albury proposes using ethics as a framework from which to understand online porn, as it allows for the celebration of the broadening of sexual experiences and sexuality online while understanding that not all spaces allow for this diversification of possibilities. Thus Albury facilitates an understanding of the internet as a space which 'is not necessarily utopian' (2003: 208) if it meets basic ethical standards, paving the way for critiques of online pornography if they are contextualized within a community-based or personal process, but refusing an external 'all bets are off' relativism in which all cybersex is uniformly condemned.” (2007: 584)

Balance is what is perhaps called for, as Wacjman suggests that we do not “treat technology as either inherently patriarchal or unambiguously liberating” (2007: 292).

b) Gendering Technology

Despite enthusiasts like Plant, Turkle and Haraway claiming the potential of technologies to offer a unique space for women, at another end of the theoretical spectrum were feminists like van Zoonen who were more cautious, pointing instead to the co-option of women into the growing consumer culture online: women are constructed as consumers, as shoppers (2001:69). However, feminists from a range of disciplines have deconstructed technologies from their very inception and design to their marketing, selling, and final use in society, the gendering of technologies, the reproduction of gender relations in technologies, and the continued marginalization of groups of women do not escape feminist perspectives. At the same time the possibilities and potential for women to become powerful and creative agents and producers in their own right are also explored. While a great deal of research explores how women use the internet and technologies, there is little that looks at how women inhabit a productive role; and much of the existing literature focuses on women’s ‘problems’ and ‘difficulties’ in approaching, accessing and using technologies. Wacjman, in her analysis asks a similar question: “why are women studied as passive victims of technology?” (2000: 450).

Some examples of research from Korea and Japan however indicate a slightly different trend. In South Korea, mobile phones are used for both phone calls and internet practices; blogs, and mini-home pages, or Mini-hompys, are extremely popular with young people to document their everyday life for friends and family to view, and as a forum for discussion and virtual catching-up. Mini-home pages establish familiarity and connection with friends but also allow users to meet new people, just as social networking sites are used anywhere else. Hjorth and Kim (2005) find that young Korean women are adept at customizing these technologies, ‘warming up’ what were considered ‘cold’ (and thereby masculine) technologies, by favouring the use ‘cute-characters’ like icons, music, graphic effects, identity logos²³. What is particularly interesting about cute-culture in Korea (and in a similar sense in Japan) is the way in which it is a distinctly female practice, a specifically female way of customizing and shaping technologies. Hjorth says of ‘cute’: “Cute culture is not necessarily about female consumers. Rather, it is about a type of feminizing and socializing of new technologies – a phenomenon that has risen concurrently with the expansion of convergent ICTs...can be seen as part of a rising trend in domestic technology whereby the once female-only preoccupation of social labour is transforming into general modes of feminized (i.e. socioemotional) practices of ICTs” (2007: 375).

23 ‘Cute’ cannot be understood in the English sense of the word. It is not considered childish in any way, and is an aesthetic embraced by young and old alike in the customization of their mini home-pages and mobile phones (51-53).

Interestingly, it was local Korean feminist research critiquing consumer culture, gender identity and computer advertising that lead to important shifts in the social and technology landscape. According to Hjorth these studies have helped dismantle the notion of women's 'passivity' in their use of technology as young women became the first to raise mini-hompys into an urban-cultural phenomenon (2005: 51)

Women's roles as producers have much to do with their access to technology-related education, skills and opportunities. This is not merely about women featuring in or creating their own web-content, but women's involvement and stake in the design, production and management of internet technologies, areas which have generically been considered male and masculine. The issues raised in looking at women as producers of technology are not unlike the issues faced by women in many scientific professions, considering that the entire construction of the 'scientific' is synonymous with maleness and masculinity. Two case studies from Europe describe how women-owned, women-designed, women-intended technologies and online spaces have grappled with the gender and technology question with two very different outcomes.

Box 2: The case of VIFU

The Virtual International Women's University (VIFU) was a North-South dialogue initiated in Germany aimed at providing access to information, activist networking and access to ICTs and communication rights for feminist/ women writers, academics and students. Isabelle Zorn (2004) describes that the VIFU design and development of the server and interface was done by, for and with women and created an enabling environment for this global network. Created by women technicians in a process that was constantly in touch with end-users, the technology was designed in a cooperative and transparent manner and was customized to the needs of the diverse population of users from across the globe. Their fears in using technologies, their opinions on the technology interface and usage practices were all sought by the (mostly female) server-designers and managers. The aim was to ensure that women had a clear say in deciding how to customize the technologies they used. Eventually VIFU continued to be managed by the users themselves who took on responsibility for the maintenance of the network. What made VIFU successful in opening up their technological processes was that they positioned themselves as a 'women's space' with the additional objective of enhancing education, information and communication between women students and academics across the world. Cooperation and dialogue were therefore central to the process.

Rommes (2002) cites the wider political moment of the late 1990s as one of the reasons why women's concerns and needs were not readily accepted as valid in the construction of internet spaces, issues that perhaps resonated in many parts of Western Europe and North America at the time. In the third wave of feminism, with Riot Grrls and their highly

individualized approach (as against more collective/community-based perspectives) of power feminism, the 'ghetto' mentality of 'places for women' were seen as limiting and retrograde, a throwback to the so-called victimization approach of second wave feminism. The potential and aims of the information society were paramount, far more important than creating a niche for women within that (404-405). The idea that technologies need to be more user-friendly or cater to specific needs were seen to reinforce stereotypes about femininity. Rommes quotes Wacjman explaining this further: "it is not simply a question of acquiring skills, because these skills are embedded in a culture of masculinity. . . . Both at school and in the workplace this culture is incompatible with femininity. Therefore, to enter this world, to learn its language, women have first to forsake their femininity' (408-409)."

Box 3: The case of the 'Women's Square'

An experiment in Amsterdam aimed at the creation of a 'Women's Square' in a digital city (Rommes, 2002). Beginning with the issue that the absence of women on the internet – as producers and managers – contributed to the increasing maleness of the internet, and that there was a serious absence of female-inclusive design, the Women's Square experimented with getting more women designers, content producers and managers involved. However, the project found that being 'female-inclusive' and including 'women designers' and technologists are not the same thing and results in a fairly complicated interaction. The idea that being gender-aware or gender-sensitive is a disadvantage in the highly male world of technology production and design was what held women designers back from co-operating with the (female) users and managers of the women's square. An old struggle was replicated, between the more female NGOs and 'movement people' and the 'hard' designers (most of who were women). To become part of the dominance of technology, and the sense that this was a male/masculinized space put pressures on women producers and designers to eventually 'betray' the needs of women users and women's groups. Women designers, hackers and scientists had to become more masculine, so that they did not risk criticizing the world they were trying to be successful in.

The tensions between the masculine attributes of technology and women's increasing participation in it are revealed in the case of gaming, an area of some of the most critical debates on gender and technology. The use of ICTs in the South, particularly in rapidly but irregularly developing regions, is met with a great deal of interest for how nascent IT industries can boost flagging economies. The need for inter-disciplinary and historicized feminist critiques of this excitement is therefore entirely necessary when faced with studies that reinforce essentialist ideas of gender in the promotion of jobs and skills in the IT and IT enabled sectors. For example, examining the potential for marginalized communities such as women, particularly young Muslim women, to find jobs in the Information Technology

Enabled Services Sector (ITES) there is an unquestioned belief in gendered 'competencies' of women: "Thanks to their biological roles and socialisation experiences, women are likely to possess higher levels of communication skills and ability for team work" and that "Self-employment offers real advantages for women since it allows them to work from home, offers flexible work schedule, and is compatible with their reproductive roles. Therefore, an effective way to improve women's position is to improve the returns to self-employment." (Ghadially & Umrani 2004).

This particular study coming out of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, India, suggests that "initiatives to boost soft skills and greater involvement of women in family business can go a long way in easing women's entry into one of the most modern and promising sectors of the Indian economy." It makes suggestions for policy and civil society/NGO initiatives toward improving women's access to IT skills and education by addressing community, cultural and family resistance. The emphasis is therefore on women participating in the nation's economic development without necessarily addressing the ways in which women's lives holistically shape and are affected by ICT use. It necessitates the question then, development for what, and for whom? And where women may be employed in the IT enabled service industries or BPOs/KPOs²⁴, there is little studied by way of *how* they experience their work in cultural, social, gendered and personal terms and how this impacts their everyday lives, with a few notable exceptions (see Poster 2007a, 2007b; Gillard et al 2008; Ng & Mitter 2005).

Like the women in Rommes' Women's Square, girls and women who play games are yet to break through a very real sort of cultural and social resistance to the idea of women being comfortable, skilled and even entertained by technologies.

The popular and journalistic writing around gaming tends to focus, with a note of surprise, that women *are* in fact playing games, and on the growing size of the gaming market for women. These writings operate from certain assumptions: women don't have as much time to play games, that they tend to prefer casual games or puzzle-games, and some massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), that they don't like the 'hack-and-slash' games that men play. That is, they tend to look specifically at what games women are consuming rather than *how* they play games, including those that men traditionally play (Wakefield 2005). This sort of approach helps formulate an understanding of the markets for gaming, which is as big a part of gaming as the games themselves.

Academic studies of gaming however lean towards actively using/producing theories of gender and technology, and exploring how they 'work' in the field given the fertile space

²⁴ Business/Knowledge Process Outsourcing

that gaming offers for this (Royse et al 2007). An insightful study by Valerie Walkerdine narrates rich ethnographic details of how young boys and girls play games, and what this implies for the constructions and shaping of gender (2006). Her study is based on a study of children between the ages of 8 and 11 playing computer games in after-school clubs in Sydney, Australia. Walkerdine argues that the common assumption that girls are empowered by their active engagement in game-play by the possibility of honing skills to win is an over-simplification of a complex engagement. She finds that girls playing games have to negotiate complex performances which demand qualities traditionally ascribed to masculinity alongside those ascribed to femininity. This produces difficulties for girls in competing to win while at the same time displaying sensitivity, caring, and co-operation, which are socially dictated feminine qualities. Walkerdine suggests that games are a site for the production of certain types of masculinities, and sets up these masculinities as an aspiration; games both demand and appear to ensure performances such as heroism, killing, winning, competition, action, combined with technological skill and rationality (520).

Taylor's (2003) work examines the very real pleasures of gaming for girls. Looking specifically at the *Everquest* environment in particular, Taylor finds that women emphasize those aspects of gaming that most appeal to them, in addition to mastery of games itself – fashioning and maintaining identities, coordinating online and offline identities and spaces (24-26). Both Walkerdine and Schott and Horrell (2000) find that the recent popularity of female avatars – highly stylized, caricatured and 'fixed' – does not do much for girls and women nor does it necessarily dent the landscape of gender relations. This is for a number of reasons; one, that the creation of female avatars are actually intended to appeal to teenage boys – the most dominant demographic in the gaming market, and are not really targeted to girls at all; this, coupled with sexualized advertising imagery, safely objectifies any subversive potential by selling it as a fixed product.

Second, Walkerdine suggests that the idea that offering girls new versions of femininity through avatars misses the enormous personal and social negotiations and performances in game-playing (2006: 532), or that a new representation of femininity offers a valid alternative performance to women entails a certain voluntarism that is essentially apolitical. Studies reveal similar responses from women players, that the sort of sexuality/gender displayed in female avatars tends to reveal someone else's fantasies and not their own; this is not to say that women do not enjoy having their own sexualized identities in games, they do, as long as they control and shape them (Royse et al 2007; Taylor 2003; Thornham 2008).

Box 4: Women Gamers Speak

“According to the ESA, 38% of American videogame players and 48% of gaming parents are women. In other countries such as Korea, statistics show as much as 69.5% of

women are playing video games. Even so, women's interests continue to be grossly under-represented (WomenGamers.com)”

In a special issue on Women in Gaming in the online magazine *The Escapist* there is a glimpse of a mostly unheard voice, that of the girl gamer, and women who write about games²⁵. What women gamers talk about is the sense of exclusion they feel from the masculine world of gaming (but not that it makes them ‘upset’ in any way). There are the usual reactions when a woman excels or even participates in what is considered a ‘male field’; there is shock, disbelief, surprise, scorn, and very rarely a grudging admiration, but one that is based on the idea that women ‘cannot do’ technology (Miller 2005; Butts 2005). In a poignant yet tongue-in-cheek piece Whitney Butts sums up the general reaction: “girls don’t exist on the internet... When I look at myself I see a girl on the internet and a girl with an internet life...I see a girl who loves to play games and kill the dirty Alliance faction on *WoW*...I can talk the talk and walk the walk. But I am not a girl on the internet because I’ve been told before, I do not exist.”

In *The Escapist* women talk about their disdain for hyper-sexualized female avatars, the resistance and rejection they face from male gamers, having to be treated like a ‘little lady’ who doesn’t know anything about technology. Danielle Vanderlip discusses this forthrightly saying that having been brought up on games since her childhood, the first time she felt marginalized on the basis of gender alone, was when she decided to study technology. Her rise, from being a just a girl who liked games, to being a co-author on strategy guides to highly popular games like *World of Warcraft*, *Shadowbane* and *Horizons* mirrors the struggle of many women before and alongside her, having to negotiate multiple roles and identities – of game-manager, player, professional, mother, wife and home-maker – in highly masculinized environments. Women gamers represented here are not apologetic for being gamers, or masculinized, nor are they cowed by the male resistance they face. Instead they experience a sense of personal agency in being able to compete in such contested terrain (Vanderlip 2005).

c) Women as Workers in the New IT economy

With some studies coming out of Malaysia and India, writers are exploring how women in the trenches of the ICT ‘revolution’ are negotiating its impacts on their everyday realities (Ng and Mitter 2005). Emerging work on the ‘IT boom’ in India comes within the scope of this review as well. Uma Devi examines the repercussions of such rapid change in the lives of women software engineers from India working in Silicon Valley, US, and how they have to negotiate the expectations of their IT jobs as efficient global workers and their host-

25 Accessible at www.escapistmagazine.com and other sites catering to women gamers are www.ladiesofhack.com and www.womengamers.com

country's culture, along with the traditional femininities expected of them (2002). There is also research that suggests that women's employment in the IT sector in India has the potential to reverse gender discrimination and inequalities for educated, middle class women by giving them professional, personal and financial autonomy (Clark and Sekhar 2007). Kandasamy (in Huyer & Mitter 2003:17) finds that unlike in North America where women's enrolment in science and technology studies has been declining, in India it is actually on the rise as this field of study is considered appropriate for women. However Clark and Sekhar's study does not explore what 'empowerment' really means aside from the idea that by being engaged in such work women are capable of more negotiation in when they get married or what they can buy; moreover, the effects of improved education and employment for working-class women in similar fields of work has not been addressed.

Recently, in Bangalore, Pune, and Bombay, cities at the epicentre of the burgeoning IT industry, there have been news reports of the rape and molestation of women working late shifts at call-centres and travelling alone through the city, often with the collusion of drivers and security guards employed by the same companies the women work in (Raghu 2005; Srivastava 2005; Times of India 2008). While Indian parents would not generally allow single, young women out alone at night, the rise of BPO-culture has assuaged some of these fears based on the assumption that 'the company will take care of them'. So it is unsurprising that these shocking incidents have returned popular thinking to the idea that women should not be allowed out at night alone; employers are quick to underplay the risks women face (without doing anything proactively for them nor in the interests of their safety) and are equally invested in not tarnishing the image of a 'shining India' and its IT boom. These incidences of violence are a critical point of inquiry for feminist research therefore, in questioning the assumptions behind 'development' and 'economic progress' and what this form of globalization means for women workers.

In the context of post-industrial Western societies with high costs of child care and poor public services for the same, flexible working has been constructed as the mantra for women's empowerment and greater productivity in the workforce. Flexible work is based on the idea that without the volume of work decreasing it can be organized around domestic responsibilities. With many more jobs being split and shared, or made flexible, women's roles as carers is implicitly assumed, and the opportunities for working from home, appears to reinforce the 'naturalness' of women's preference for flexible work arrangements (Gregg 2008: 287). It raises concerns then with the construction of the 'new economy' worker as being an ambitious, flexible, adaptive and individualistic worker (Morgan 2006:141): how then are women as workers expected to mould themselves and manage their caring responsibilities within this? Gregg makes the point then that it becomes important to ask *what kinds* of flexibility are enjoyed by *which kinds* of workers, and if it comes at the cost of empowerment or successful career progression (293,

emphasis in original). Moreover, employers eventually retain control over the parameters of flexibility (Perrons 2003: 69).

In reality, employers manage to avoid any responsibility for work-life balance issues by passing on the responsibility for 'coordination' and 'management' of work and time to individual women, with the expectation that she adjust her work around the flexibility she is being given (Gregg 2008: 74). Also, not only is the existing child-care system reinforced (that is, women continue in this role, largely) through flexible new economy jobs, but there is also a normalization of the *kinds* of work women will do to maintain the smooth functioning of the domestic, private sphere: part-time, administrative, lacking the complexity of face-to-face contact, and "typically thankless." (Gregg 2008: 292). Perrons discovers a similar profiling, finding that the new wired economy 'pushes' women, ethnic minorities and working class people into generic, low paid jobs whereas better educated, white and middle class men are in 'self-programmable' knowledge economy jobs (2003: 68).

Gregg is also mindful of how technology has also contributed to the globalization process and that it connects the world as never before; the call to feminist research is to interrogate (perhaps because few others will) who enjoys what flexibility and freedom and at what cost, often to someone else in an entirely different context elsewhere in the world: "If middle-class women in information jobs are regularly shown to have the freedom to choose when and where they work, those of us benefiting from this frequent flyer lifestyle must remember that this choice is always dependent on the labour of many other women who remain in inflexible, often dangerous, manual jobs, far removed from the polished advertising imagery of new media hype. It is this international division of labour amongst and between women which must provide the end-point for any emergent feminist politics around "new economy workplaces." (297)

PART II: KEY THEMES IN LITERATURE ON SEXUALITY, WOMEN AND THE INTERNET

1. Sexual Practices and the internet

Type the word 'sex' into a Google search and there are 703 million results for its definition alone²⁶. But beyond looking for definitions what kinds of online sexual behaviour do users engage in? Doring (2000) believes that there is very little systematic listing of what constitutes 'sex on the internet' and proceeds to list the different kinds of sexual activities possible online. In addition to 'actual' cyber-sexual activities, there are a range of spaces to access sexual content that is visual, auditory, participatory and those that can be translated into offline spaces (mail-order brides, escorts, prostitution, sex toys). Considering the diversity of sexual spaces and content on the internet²⁷ it may not be possible to fully appreciate the range of what is out there. Academicians, writers and journalists however attempt to make some sense of this. In this section we explore some of the existing academic research into what we have called 'online sexual practices' and delve deeper into the dominant themes that emerge. These studies often pose the question, how do you 'do' sexuality online? How is this related to what happens offline? Has the internet changed how sex is viewed and practiced? Are we witnessing the evolution of new forms of sexual pleasures, sexual entertainment and sexual practices with the internet?

a) Old wine, new bottle? Discussions on cyber-porn and cyber-sex

In a comprehensive paper, J.J. McCreddie Lillie (2002) reviews approaches used to study 'cyber porn', a genre that has generated considerable literature. The primary approach has been behavioural-psychological research pioneered by Alvin Cooper since 1997. These studies are concerned with questions of delinquency, the demographic profile of those who

²⁶ The first page of results lists everything from a link to a porn website ("full free porn videos and DVDs sex porno porntube XXX porn"), a Wikipedia article on sex, to information about the movie Sex and the City, to a sex education site to a Los Angeles Times article ("what does that have to do with same-sex marriage") to 'Sex and the Olympic City' – an article on the sexual excesses of Olympic athletes.

²⁷ From surfing for cyber-porn to seeking sexual health information online, exchanging sexual texts in chat rooms and having 'cyber-sex', registering on online dating services, match-making websites, shopping online for sex toys and erotica, expressing oneself by blogging about sex or self-publishing erotica, sexualized gaming, flirting in Second Life, building a community and safe space for sexually marginalized people to connect, finding 'like-minded' collaborators to live out fantasies, to not only consuming but also the labour of producing porn, - there are clearly a rich variety of ways that sexuality manifests itself on the internet, and women are a part of these in different ways from men, primarily because of the different dynamics of sexual and gendered forms of relating.

seek and conduct sex on the internet and why they do so. Cooper (1998) proffered the Triple-A-Engine of Access, Affordability and Anonymity as a rationale; according to him, men engage in sexual behaviour on the internet because they can access it in the privacy of their own homes/offices at a low cost and the anonymity offered by the net does not potentially stigmatize their sexual behaviour. The agenda of these studies, states McCreadie Lillie, has been to describe what 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' behaviour is and then suggest possible remedies for the compulsive and addictive use of cyber-porn. Interestingly, some later studies also look at the internet and cyber-porn not only as a cause of sexual pathologies but also as a possible remedy and a tool for therapy for people with sexual compulsivity (Chirban 2006; Cooper & McLoughlin 2001).

The second approach has been a cause-and-effect approach, which has focused on the exposure of children to cyber-porn and its harmful effects on the child and on society (Griffiths 2000; Schell et al 2007; Quayle & Taylor 2003), offering solutions such as adult supervision and filtering software to prevent this. This area of research has generated considerable media and State attention leading to the evolution of special teams, methods (like internet sting operations) and efforts on the part of some governments to combat internet pedophilia (Fulda, 2002) and research and development of software by corporations to prevent such exposure.

The third approach has been the examination of cyber-porn as an industry through perspectives of economy and law. Author and lawyer Frederick S. Lane (2000) in his book *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Porn in the Cyber Age* re-orient focus away from the behavioural aspect of male consumers to the business aspect of those producing porn on the internet. Has pornography merely migrated to a new platform or is there a more profound shift with the internet? The internet, he writes, has led to a shift in the pornography business from being underground smut to an above-board model for entrepreneurship. Generating \$10 billion in revenue as an industry (apparently more than other segments of the entertainment industry) and having low start-up and maintenance costs, web-based pornography offers small entrepreneurs (including women) tremendous economic opportunities, and it is this economics that is partially responsible for the prevalence of cyber-porn.

The fourth major area of work has been in the context of 'identity groups' and how they have used cyber-porn and cyber-sex to create spaces for themselves and push for their own agendas. Laurence J. O' Toole's book *Pornocopia* (1998) has been described as a "defense of porn" that is one of the first to look at the issue of desire and document voices

of porn viewers and groups such as sex workers, porn fans, 'cybersex goddesses' in the US and the UK. With the internet, O'Toole feels that porn has "emerged from the shadows into the realm of acceptable entertainment".

Other discussions have been around cyber-sex, a new form of online sexual activity that is not limited to viewing pornographic materials but involves sexual interactions with others online. Cyber-sex has been defined as "when two or more the people are engaging in sexual talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure and may or may not include masturbation" (Daneback, Cooper and Mansson 2005) and usually takes place in chat rooms, via instant-messenger where exchange of photographs or images may or may not be involved. The debates have been around whether cyber-sex constitutes adulterous behaviour that is likely to destroy stable relationships or family life; whether cyber-sex increases or decreases risky behaviour; and on what is the exact appeal of this form. Because of its text-based format and the absence of 'touching' and 'feeling' (in fact, usually only typing is involved) or even visual modes of arousal, this has also raised interest in the area of linguistics, as some point out that cyber-sex is essentially about 'sexy language' (Ross 2005). Text based arousal has long been a major tool of expressing and feeling pleasure and desire. Women in particular have been identified as having more experience in text based romance with the genre of romantic novels like Mills and Boon etc. that had an element of sexual titillation and excitement, whereas men are traditionally identified with visual pleasures and a stack of pornographic magazines hidden under the bed (ibid).

The influence of the internet on sexual practices in other parts of the world with lower levels of 'Access, Affordability and Anonymity' has not been sufficiently studied. In this context, it is pertinent to mention McCreadie Lillie's reception studies approach (2002) that talks about the need to study porn from the perspective of how/where/in which political and moral economy it is viewed. It would be significant to ask how the emergence of cybercafés²⁸ in developing countries and their regulation impact how sexuality on the internet will be received by men and women, which rarely find mention in studies on cyber-sex and cyber-porn.

b) Online Relationships

A break with public health and risk-focused research has been reflected only recently in the context of mapping those who seek both sexual and non-sexual relationships through the

28 A new piece of work by anthropologist Nicholas Nisbett (2006) examines precisely this in his doctoral research; his rich ethnography of cyber-café-culture in India's IT hub, Bangalore, reveals the construction of the cyber-café as a masculine social space where ideas of 'progress' and 'modernity' and 'being global' are formulated through being online. Meeting girls online, accessing pornography, and, most importantly, accessing 'the global' as markers of 'arrival', of transcending class and ethnic identities, are discussed at the juncture of online and offline worlds.

internet. Daneback, Mansson et al (2007) examine sexual practices in Sweden using an online questionnaire to find how people use online dating sites, web communities, web chat rooms and gaming to find offline partners. Newer voices within the discipline of psychology, or rather the subset of 'cyber-psychology', suggest that the use of the internet to find offline partners is a widespread activity and relationships initiated online are stronger or last longer than those initiated face to face (McKenna et al 2002; Whitty and Gavin 2001). Recent studies also indicate that the population of internet users is more generalized, especially those who seek relationships and romance. Valkenburg & Peter (2007) write that theories of a decade back – that only lonely people or those with social anxieties use the internet for such activity – do not apply to this generation of internet users. By 2001, 1.2 million users with no specific demographic profile were using online dating sites in North America (reference).

Susan Frohlick and Paula Migliardi's news story (2008) on Canadian women using the internet for sexual and intimate relationships also reject the popular notion that "net dating is full of overweight, desperate welfare moms seeking someone to support them" (anonymous comment left on the website giving information about this study), finding that online dating has led to women adopting new approaches to sexuality. Previous studies focused on the potential risks and pitfalls of this, but their study finds that women are having positive experiences, gaining confidence, overcoming low self esteem related to body image issues (as the internet is a space where how they look does not immediately affect the relationship), and are learning to deal with the attendant risks like deception and fraud. Women felt they acquired skills through the use of these dating sites that helped them read people more accurately. Worth mentioning is Bigg's revealing paper (2000) titled 'Charlotte's Web', a detailed case study of one woman engaging with the internet in her everyday life, and her own reflection on how the internet has impacted the way she has built relationships, as well as played a positive role in finding 'herself'.

Matchmaking sites are reported to be rising dramatically – in number, in volume of membership and in revenue, with sites now "catering to niche demographics, from those devoted to Jewish communities to ones for Ivy League partners to country specific matchmaking sites" such as sites in China and India (Hein, 2004; Kurtzman, 1998 in Chatterjee, 2007). In the case of India, for example, it has been culturally adapted to the context of the Indian arranged marriage as evident from the success of matrimonial websites²⁹. The difference is that in this new electronic form men and women have more agency in the process, being considerably freed from the constraints of parental authority

²⁹ Like www.shaadi.com, www.BharatMatrimony.com and now even www.secondshaadi.com for divorced and widowed people. These sites, where prospective brides and grooms can post their 'resumes' and requirements (caste, occupation, even salary range as in traditional arranged marriage processes) and 'match' these with other users have found great success amongst educated (and even less computer literate) populations, especially for Indians living abroad seeking to follow an arranged marriage practice on foreign shores (Chatterjee, 2007).

and surveillance (Jana, 2000), particularly considering that Indian society is still fairly sex-segregated.

Box 5: Chinese Web Marriages

The 'web-marriage' phenomenon in China is a popular internet-based romantic/sexual practice by young people that is integrated into internet use and gaming culture but is generally frowned upon by the wider Chinese society. Similar to the Multi-User Domain (MUD) online identity/role-playing games, web-marriage practices allow teenagers to experiment with different identities and relationships, and confound the public/private and online/offline divides within their societies. These sites give young people the space to engage in the rituals of dating, courtship, falling in love, weddings and marriages, divorce, setting up a home and having children together. While some web-marriage sites 'do not oppose homosexual marriages', there are those that expressly do. Adult men and women who began playing at web marriages in their late teens continue even as they are married in real life/offline, raising questions of fidelity and bigamy, in some cases leading to the real breakdowns of some offline marriages, thus prompting officials to call for a block on such sites³⁰. Web marriages are a way to experiment with new forms of relationships and sexuality in a digital world, and in a way that while being censured offline, cannot really be controlled beyond a point (McLaren 2007: 411-420).

c) Youth, sexuality and the internet

The study of young people³¹ and sexuality online is usually characterised by a tension in the double edged nature of the internet, that it can offer spaces for 'education' or 'expression', and yet simultaneously bears the potential for violence, addiction and degeneration, particularly for youth³² (Alvin et al 2000; Dryer & Lijtmaer 2007). Young people seeking relationships online or their tendency (at least, that of young boys) to surf porn and the repercussions/implications of this has also been an area of study that has generated a vast amount of literature. That young people are online and searching for romance and partners is well established. Smahel & Subrahmanyam (2007) find that in online teen chat rooms³³, two requests for a partner occur each minute: "the search for partners is ubiquitous in adolescents' online haunts, just as it is in their offline lives."

30 Web-marriages worry the state and families since young people are known to become 'obsessed' with their web romances and thus avoid school work and offline social interactions and relationships. Moreover, it gives them the sense of these experiences without the responsibility that go with them, creating fears about the sorts of (negative) values young people are learning.

31 in the broad age group of 10-24 years, with a greater focus on those in the age group 15-24 years

32 See footnote 2

33 Participants in the chat rooms ranged from 10-24 years of age; analysis of data was done by categorizing responses into the following age groups: 10-13; 14-15; 16-17; 18-24 years. Those who claimed to be 16-17 years most actively searched for a partner.

While assessing the questions on the bulletin board of a popular health support website for teens, they find that questions about romantic relationships are the second most frequently posted. The most frequently posted questions are on sexual health. This is not surprising considering that sexuality education in schools is a hotly debated issue, from America to China. The issue of whether online sex education can fill that gap therefore, is a subject of research. Unsurprisingly there is enough evidence for both positive and negative results; Hong, Li et al (2007)³⁴ find that in China accessing the internet does NOT improve HIV prevention and awareness-related knowledge, and “it is porn websites and online sex shops that provide bulk of internet based sex education at the present time”. And there are a plethora of other studies that suggest that the internet can be an effective space for sex education programmes (Mitchell et al 2004; Lou et al 2006; Ngo et al 2008).

Moreover the ideology underlying such programs obviously has implications for their content and effectiveness. Beliefs in the dangers of the internet for children are less likely to approach online sexuality education from a youth perspective that really addresses their needs. Methodologies of learning, the context of the offline environment in which learning happens, and even the effectiveness of the internet as a learning tool are important issues to consider. It has been identified as having special pedagogical benefits as it allows learners to choose convenient time/place/pace of learning (Lou et al, 2006)³⁵. Jackson et al (2007) track ‘what children do on the net’³⁶ by studying ninety low income single-parent households (mostly African American) in the USA who are provided with a computer and internet access. They find that surfing pornography is one of the top five activities initially, more so for boys, but as the novelty wore out, visits to porn sites dropped after the first three months. On the whole however, improved academic performances were noted with internet activity and parents were happy, reporting that the internet had “allowed us to access information we normally wouldn’t have... it’s served a very good purpose.” However Sonia Livingstone’s work in the UK reveals that parents’ fears about the dangers of cyberspace and technologies – of pedophilia, of damaging the computer or software - actually inhibit young people’s ability to benefit from its positive aspects as a learning tool (BBC 2001). So while the internet itself may have benefits as a learning tool, the context in which young people access it can work to undermine its potential.

34 In the study, the mean age of the sample is 20 years; they are college going students mostly within the age group 18-20 years.

35 They find that high school students and college students as per their sample, mostly between the age of 15-20 years take particularly well to this medium.

36 ‘Children’ in their sample refers to early teens, with 83% of their sample being 13 year old African Americans.

The sexuality of young girls however remains under-explored with only a few studies available, like Carla Stokes' paper (2007) on how Black American adolescent girls (of 14-17 years of age) explore their sexual self-identity and explore their emerging sexuality. Stokes 'investigates sexual scripts, self-definitions and hip hop culture' in girls' self representation on their home pages and finds that a singular approach to sexuality education will exclude specific issues of girls and young women, especially in relation to different contexts of race, class and location. Another study that picks up on the absence of girl-focused information is by Mitchell, Reid-Walsh and Pithouse (2004) who explore the potential of digital media in youth-friendly HIV initiatives in South Africa. They find that girl's magazines like *Seventeen* and their associated websites fill this gap by discussing some questions about sexuality in between advertisements for make up and fashion. They also review some alternative websites to these and initiatives aimed at giving young girls in South Africa information that is not mediated by adults, and seek to give girls a space of their own and state that "a compelling argument can be made for investigating the ways in which youth-friendly initiatives that are meant to address the information-gap related to sexuality and HIV/AIDS can incorporate the World Wide Web". In general though, and not just in the context of the internet, as Lamb (2001) shows in her book on "the secret lives of girls"³⁷ where she discusses taboo issues of sexuality and aggression in young girls, young female sexuality remains an under-researched area.

d) Race, gender and violence: The dark side of sexuality on the internet

³⁷ Lamb's interviews are with 'girls' in the age group 6-18 years and 'women' between 18-70 years.

Studies have brought out other formats of sex on the internet that are more problematic and raise concerns for feminists, for example, sex tourism, the phenomenon of 'mail order brides', or the disturbing phenomenon of 'rape sites'.

Gossett's and Byrne's (2002) content analysis of 31 websites using the terms "rape" and "forced sex" are compelled to preface their paper with a warning about explicit and violent content. These websites are free-to-access and, using a combination of text and images, recreate scenes of physical and verbal abuse and rape³⁸. Although it is not clear whether these acts are real or simulated performances, some sites advertise the incidents as 'real'. Within a site, it is possible for the viewer to select a 'scene' (such as 'Japanese Rape Gang Bang' or 'Tortured and Raped in a Barn'); a particular type of woman/girl ('Japanese schoolgirls' or 'Asian teens'); or in some cases, even participate in the rape (one site had a downloadable "cyberslave" programme after which the viewer could "torture her and abuse her anyway you wish")³⁹. Some show how rape is 'deserved' by bad women, others highlight innocence. Besides the images it is the text that actually works to establish the violence⁴⁰.

In most cases, emphasis is on the victim whereas the perpetrator is not seen. Of the clear images of victims shown, the authors try to assess the race of the victim and find that there is an over-representation of Asian women⁴¹, a considerable number of white women and no black women as victims. In asking if there is a correlation between watching such violence and 'doing' it in real life, the absence of images of black women, even though they are (statistically) often victims of real violence, is marked as "noteworthy" by the authors. They conclude that, "The new technology of the internet dramatically increases the accessibility of pornography—particularly of violent images—and thus debates about the regulation and social consequences of pornography must increase as well."

38 with titles like 'The Rapist Archive', 'Torture and Rape Diaries', 'Real Brutal Rape Videos', 'Asian Schoolgirl Raped and Tortured', 'Forced Sex', 'Forced Submission', and 'Women in Pain'.

39 On these sites, scenes also have details like descriptions of how the victim was drugged before the rape; use of electric shock, hot wax and vaginal mutilation; and use of weapons and 'props' (including ropes, cloth gags, handcuffs, chains, guns, knives, bats, whips and cages).

40 For example, text with an image of a young naked girl with a pained expression says "These teenagers' hell is your pleasure. They are stretched, whipped, raped and beaten...crushed, twisted, pierced, thrashed, and tortured....torn and ripped...beaten till bloody...stretched, used as target practice...they scream, cry, and plead."

41 34 out of 56 clear images of victims are Asian. This reflects some racial sexual stereotyping of Asian women as "passive yet artful and eager to please" (Nowrojee and Silliman, 1997) but the authors feel that the images (mostly in pain) are not passive in any way; in these sites "racial images are not related to passive stereotypes...but related to torture."

Clearly, race enters the discussion significantly here. A Google search for 'Asia, women, sexuality, internet' disproportionately finds ads for 'hot Asian exotic sexy women', whereas similar searches for Africa or Australia or Europe in place of Asia does not yield similar results. Race and ethnicity is central to the context of mail order brides and sex tourism as well. Both of these are rooted in the history of military intervention of the United States in particular, in countries like Philippines, Vietnam and Korea. Mail order brides are an extension of the tradition of 'war brides' that evolved in this period (Anderson, 1993) while sex tourism has been part of the military and corporate models of mass recreation for decades (Truong 1990; Bishop and Lillian 2002).

Mail-order brides existed as a practice through magazines before they moved to the internet in the 1990s⁴². These magazines were essentially catalogues by 'international marriage agencies' (like the well known Cherry Blossoms) that featured profiles of women, usually from East Asia in particular Philippines, with Russia/Latin America later, who could be 'ordered' by Northern men looking for women to fulfil traditional gender roles of sexual partner, companion, domestic help and caregiver. Once transposed onto the internet though, the number of companies providing such 'e-mail order' marriage services exploded (Constable 2003; Schaeffer-Grabiel 2004)⁴³. Benefits of being on the net include an unlimited audience, lower costs of production and the ability to circumvent any prohibitive national legislation in this area. Donna Hughes notes how the Philippines government banned the operation of these agencies in 1990 after receiving an alarming number of cases of violence (Hughes 2002; Anderson 1993) against Filipina women who had been 'lured' to the West to marry mail order husbands. However this only resulted in pushing the business underground, the relocating operations to other countries, and the recruiting of local women through the internet.

Literature consistently shows the attendant risks of mail order brides: a series of high profile cases of violence, abuse and murders of mail order brides by husbands (and husbands by

42 The mail order bride industry has always been a thriving one – reports from 1990 state that at that point of time, approximately 200 companies operated in the United States and an estimated 2000 to 3500 American men found wives through these catalogues each year (Anderson, 1993).

43 Nicole Constable writes that by 2000 there were more than 350 Internet agencies plying the email-order marriage trade. Some of these websites include: www.internationalbride.com, www.bridesbymail.com, www.volgaqirl.com, www.goodwife.com, www.anastasiaweb.com and www.thai-professional.com, www.limaladies.com, and www.planet-love.com.

brides); violence and abuse that results when unrealistic expectations of both sides are not met especially when the “beautiful, faithful, Asian wife” stands up or speaks up quite unlike the passive, meek stereotypes that buyers expect; and problems they face as conditional residents whose abusive spouses hold much power over their legal status (Anderson 1993). Hughes (1997) has also raised the issue of the possibilities of child abuse occurring in the guise of an agency-mediated international marriage by highlighting how catalogues often have women who are 17 years and younger and sometimes even children of 13 or 14 years.

Feminist studies have focused more on the binaries of the developed-developing world and ‘object’ position of women, without documenting the voices of women or men who are actually central to the processes. However recent studies attempt to change this, for example Nicole Constable’s book *Romance on a Global Stage* (2003) which is a feminist ethnography combining internet ethnography and face-to-face fieldwork, of the experiences of correspondence courtships and marriages between US men and Filipina or Chinese women, that manages to “convey the richness and dignity of women’s and men’s choices without reducing these correspondents to calculating opportunists or naive romantics.” Another study by Felicity Schaeffer-Grabiel (2004) examines voices of Latin American ‘cyber-brides’ and American men who seek partnerships through this medium. Both these studies give an opportunity for the men involved to talk about their experiences and the misinformation that they believe exist around white males seeking love/romance/companionship from foreign women. The inclusion of male voices is part of a broader trend that looks at sexuality and the internet from the perspective of masculinities (Bishop and Lillian, 2002; Constable, 2003; Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2004).

The discourse of mail order brides is incomplete without reference to globalization and migration, the immigrant dream and the desire of people from all over the world to escape poverty, hardship and sometimes violence – all of which are escalating and intensifying in many parts of the world in the aftermath of globalization and structural adjustment policies. ‘Email order marriages’ are “an example of globalization writ large” writes Constable (2003). In the case of women in a globalizing world, often the wares they have to ‘sell’ are their gendered sexual and non sexual labour, which are driving the feminization of migration globally (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). These aspects come together cogently in the role of a mail order bride⁴⁴. Schaeffer-Grabiel also puts the phenomenon of the cyber-bride in this context of globalization when she considers “why, at this particular moment, transnational marriages are so alluring” arguing that “outsourcing the family from developing nations follows the logic of the transnational economy and corporate multiculturalism”. The

44 Wikipedia defines a mail order bride as “a woman who publishes her intent to marry someone from another - usually more developed – country”. This choice of words implies that women often want to or choose to be a mail order bride.

underlying message is that the real issues are at a macro-structural level, the internet only facilitates it.

Similarly in the case of sex tourism, Than-dam Truong (1990) writes that the Thai tourism sector developed because of a recommendation by a World Bank report; implementing this meant building on existing infrastructure set up by foreign military bases in the region, at the heart of which was commercial sex. Yet there is no doubt that the internet has given sex tourism a new platform, an unlimited audience and made it much easier for people to have information and detailed knowledge of where they can go to buy sex in different parts of the world. The World Sex Guide⁴⁵ for example, is a website that presents sex-related information from over eighty countries from all continents⁴⁶. The World Sex Guide has been analysed by both Donna Hughes (1997) and Bishop and Lillian (2002) coming from different perspectives, and yet both are struck by the imperialism inherent in the narratives of the male clients. Hughes writes, "The women are completely objectified and evaluated on everything from skin colour to presence of scars and firmness of their flesh". Affronted by comments posted on these sites, Hughes states (problematically) that "it should be illegal to use the internet to post information on finding and sexually exploiting young women and children". But is discussing it in chat rooms any different from men chatting about where to buy women in bars or locker rooms? If posting information on the internet is illegal, will men not find other ways to share this information?

Bishop and Lillian (2002) take a different approach and analyse pages from the World Sex Guide as well as a parallel site the Banker's World Sex Guide especially in the context of Thailand trying to understand the motivations and experiences of men who make these entries⁴⁷. In their analysis, most of the entries are "economic confessionals", about money rather than sex – bargains, the need for caution, how to negotiate transactions in different sex venues and how to "avoid being exploited while engaged in the act of exploitation". For Bishop and Lillian, the entries offer strong indictments of an almost mechanical, alienating male sexuality. The privileged positioning of the men making the entries is more problematic however: "The interactive potential of the internet may emerge in a postcolonial moment and institutions, but it is by no means post-imperial in its materialization... Despite its democratic and utopian proclamations, discourse on the web is also ever unidirectional, ever the domain of the privileged, ever self referential, and ever emanating from the dominant subject position"⁴⁸. Both studies note that men actually do use these sites, take printouts etc. to practice sex tourism in real life, with the newer study by Bishop and Lillian

45 See www.worldsexguide.org

46 Clicking on any country in the category of 'Prostitution by Country,' one can find details such as: legal status of prostitution in that country, age of consent, current prices for various acts, sometimes an indication of what women in that country will not do, directions to red light districts, hotels, taxis, and so on.

47 While these sites act as travel guides/diaries of sorts and a space for "returning sex tourists to de-stress from the travel experience by producing texts on the net", they find that entries are perfunctory in most cases except places like Thailand (where entries run into hundreds of pages) and alienated from one another and there is no dialogue as such between different users.

commenting on how men are now taking laptops into bars and reading out narratives from websites to girls in bars, especially ones in which they are mentioned by name, leading to “squeals of excitement”.

These studies show that the internet has in some way modified existing problematic sexual practices that have their roots in historical social inequalities. More disturbingly however, these studies reveal how the internet has become a repository for unchanged and unchallenged attitudes with regard to race, imperialism and gender, implicating women of colour/from the global South in complex ways.

e) The anticipation of Sexual Revolution 2.0

The internet's influence on 'doing sexuality' has also been significantly commented on in mainstream literature, offering some idea of ongoing discussion around how the internet has opened up individual sexual exploration and enhanced people's engagement with sex, especially in the USA. For a country that conducts most of its life on the internet – shopping, reading, business, trading, information seeking, research, could sex be far behind? Brian Alexander in his book *America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction* (2007) finds that you can't write about contemporary American sexuality without bumping into technology, especially the internet. The author speaks to people across the nation and repeatedly his subjects tell him that “the internet had opened their eyes, dispelled their fears, given them new avenues for pleasure, and provided support as they figured out what they really wanted from sex.”⁴⁹

The preoccupation with sex and technology has in fact led to the evolution of 'sex tech' as a journalistic beat. Regina Lynn is a sex tech columnist⁵⁰ who began writing a popular column titled *Sex Drive* for the hallowed *Wired* magazine⁵¹. Her books (Lynn 2005, 2008) are targeted at young Northern women familiar with the Internet and with access to a certain lifestyle and bank balance in a post-feminist, liberal social context, and invite women to “dispel apprehension surrounding the use of new technologies and take the lead in redefining sex, relationships and love in the information age” and herself admits how online encounters helped her overcome her real-life inhibitions. In fact, there are various such 'sex-positive feminists' like Lynn who identify themselves as feminists who approach

48 They are echoing what Hughes noted in her previous work, “The men buying the women and posting the information see and perceive the events only from their self interested perspective. Their awareness of racism, colonization, global economic inequalities, and of course, sexism, is limited to how these forces benefit them. A country's economic or political crisis and the accompanying poverty are advantages which produce cheap women for the men. Often men describe how desperate the women are and how little the men have to pay.”

49 The internet has led to an explosion of sexual exploration, feels Alexander, as he narrates how ladies 'sit in living rooms to shop for arousal enhancing gels and vibrating cock rings' or a couple using Craigslist finds other people for group sex in five minutes and fixes up a meeting place close by.

50 Lynn also writes a blog Sex Rev 2.0 'Where Sex and Tech Come Together' and has published two books on what she feels is the 'Sexual Revolution 2.0'.

51 www.wired.com

sexuality and technology more aggressively, from the perspective that women's sexuality and desires need to be reclaimed and technology is one of the ways that enables this⁵².

Amber Rhea was one of the organizers of a day-long event held in Atlanta called Sex 2.0, a conference that focused on "the intersection of social media, feminism and sexuality" in which sessions ranged from erotic writing to queer identity online to effects of the internet on the escort industry and sex workers' concerns. Rhea feels it is important to identify the conference as a feminist space because "there is a real dearth of venues in which women can talk about sexuality without feeling judged, stifled or stigmatized" (in Cory Silverberg, 2008). Rhea states that she went to great lengths to ensure privacy, confidentiality and a non-hostile environment at the conference so that women, including sex workers, would be comfortable discussing these issues. According to her, "Women are at the forefront of innovative uses of online technology for sexual purposes, and it's important that we make our voices heard on the variety of issues that affect us in doing so."

Regina Lynn discusses various themes that illustrate how the internet has indeed become a place for pushing the frontiers of sexual knowledge and experience, and finding communities that consensually engage in these explorations⁵³. This brings up the observation by some psychologists that however 'weird' a kink a person has, they will always find a group of people on the internet with similar kinks (McFarlane and Kachur 2003). This fact really turns on its head ideas of 'abnormal', 'pathological' or unnatural sex, and illustrates the wide variety of sexual forms/practices/ relationships that *do* exist outside strict hetero-normative constructions of sexuality.

While the internet was a blessing for the porn industry, and it is fact this industry that has always had access to the most sophisticated software and technologies, twenty years of easily accessible forms of porn has made 'processed' pornography 'boring'. In a situation where consumers have now actually 'seen it all' the pornography industry is beset with new issues. The question of longevity of a porn site is one of them. Changing consumer desires in porn consumption are also a concern. Only those sites which adapt to changing needs survive. Lynn discusses sites like Kink that started in 1997, and www.abbywinters.com in 2000, and observes that the future of commercial porn is not in slick studio shoots but "realistic portrayals of sexual experiences in partners with real chemistry" (Lynn 2008b). Curiously, it is the very virtuality of the internet, so desired for the anonymity it offers, that is now felt to be limited as it cannot give the experience of 'reality'.

⁵² Amber Rhea www.beingamberrhea.com and Audacia Ray www.audaciaray.com www.wakingvixen.com are popular icons online of this 'smart sex culture'

⁵³ The term polyamory refers to the practice of multiple intimate relationships with knowledge of all concerned. An alt.polyamory Usenet group was created in 1992 and rapidly became the hub of a 'practice' and a space where "you could meet poly people in a group and talk about it in a safe place." (Lynn, 29/02/08) By 2006 the word had made it to the Oxford Dictionary and in a sense, polyamory and discussion around it did lead to opening up of how we understand 'family'.

From a labour perspective, these sites provide unusually detailed information on their processes. The website www.abbywinters.com does not accept user-generated content but is keen for feedback and replies to these comments almost immediately. Ideas for shoots and shots are taken from visitors. According to the site, only the 'script' is loosely developed by the producers, while letting "sexual energy build up organically. Performers decide what to do, when to do." Kink on the other hand emphasizes transparency, publishes their pay scale as well as their models' rights policy. "Like in real kink sex – Kink models can stop a scene anytime by uttering a safe word." These examples indicate that from a labour rights perspective, women in the industry (models and actors) are not necessarily without agency or in a set up of organized crime as indicated by authors like Hughes⁵⁴.

A study from Thailand describes the similar 'benefits' of internet-mediated prostitution, where local women manage their own home-pages advertising prostitution. N. Veena describes how using the internet has brought benefits to the women who sell services online: it helps protect their identity and thereby avoid social stigma, and it increases their earnings by removing the pimp and awards greater control over their lives by deciding when, where and how they will offer what services. Being able to use the internet also gave them an edge over peers since it was indicative of better 'status'. However, sex work for these women is still fraught with risks in the offline world when they come up against the reality of customer-violence and risks of contracting a STD/HIV (2007).

There is also considerable content and e-commerce concerned with sexual appliances or sex toys – from gels to vibrators and the like. Regina Lynn's column gives considerable space to innovative sexual appliances. She discusses that range of people making sex toys – for example, a former soldier once posted in the Middle East; and a pregnant couple for whom it is too risky to have sex created something to specifically cater to other couples like themselves and now have a successful business selling their device online. As with any kind of technology the stress on design is at the forefront and happily, stigma associated

⁵⁴ In fact they seem not to get caught in the "is sex work 'work' or violence against women" debates that continue to plague feminist debates around prostitution and pornography. They are workers, performers, actresses, professionals.

with sex appliances has gradually decreased, to the extent that their inclusion in mainstream public discussions have led to the emergence of a new term – ‘sensual intelligence’ – referring to appliances that combine easy usability with a cool design. (Lynn 2008a).

2. Power, Politics and Representation in Cyberspace

An abstract, virtual, imaginary ‘location’ loaded with the imagery of a borderless zone outside our existing world; metaphors of being the last frontier; politics of a new kind of freedom, a “civilization of the Mind” which cannot be ruled by governments (Barlow, 1996). Is cyberspace really any different from offline spaces? Are different relations of power possible? Can sexuality be practiced, expressed or experienced differently by women here or is it another projection of existing relations of race, gender, class? How are women organizing online and evolving new modes of activism and networking? How are they representing themselves and their sexuality online? Are women in cyberspace changing the central aspects of the representation debates?

In this section we revisit some issues where questions of power/politics have been traditionally located, especially with reference to sexuality, and try to make sense of whether it is any different in cyberspace.

a) Activism and Networking

Box 6: Feminist Networking

In the mid 1990s with the internet becoming widely available in the global North, younger generations of feminists were primarily responsible for examining cyberspace as a space

for a new kind of politicization, where women could express and discover the commonness of their oppression and devise new ways and strategies to connect to combat this. The networked, non-hierarchical structure of the internet allowed it to become an ally for women's rights and to globalize their activism. Feminist academic and activist movements organized and spoke through 'zines, Usenet groups, discussion groups and listserves. Feminist artists, musicians and writers used it to mainstream their politics.

Women's movements have been intensified and become globally networked and been enabled to participate in international processes, especially those that influence policy, through their engagement with the internet. For example in Latin America 400 women's organizations have been connected since the launch of ModemMujer by APC in 1993. ModemMujer was integral to the success of Latin American women's participation in the 1995 Beijing conference by providing networking and technology workshops for women and NGOs (Friedman 2005: 7). List-serves and text-based emails also been a significant way to link feminist organizations in Latin America that are more technologically equipped; that they are all connected through either Spanish or Portuguese makes it that much easier to have cross-continental connections. Friedman reports that lesbian groups across the region find a way to connect to each other and the world outside through e-mail (11-12).

At the same time feminist theoreticians were exploring how cyberspace could provide alternate ways of imagining and interrogating gender relations. However one of the main

issues that dogs feminists in the South is summed up by Cindy Flores (2002): “The few Latina feminists interested in philosophy and theory related to cyberspace are conflicted about involving themselves in ruminating about this, given the urgent every day need for action to address the ongoing extreme violence against women ... the rapes of indigenous women ... or the urgent need for sexual and reproductive education in the rural areas.”

Feminists like Micky Lee are also concerned with how, despite technologies giving women greater voice and agency, there are as many who find that the construct of women’s development does not take into consideration the interplay of gender and technologies in local contexts: if the discourses of development and technologies are colonial (and privileged and masculinized), then how should global feminists question and unsettle the dominant discourses?” (2006: 196). The critical control exerted by global political-economic structures is something that Lee believes feminist analyses of gender and technology also need to incorporate in their assessments.

Feminist academics have written about how the internet has a positive role in building a trans-national feminist movement, raising global awareness and mobilizing support for women’s issues such as violence against women, offering a platform for the globalization of activism, resistance and networking (Turkle, 1995; Plant, 1998; van Zoonen, 2001). But a great deal of feminist work happens offline and so Orgad believes it is critical to evaluate “whether and how online communication (in its various manifestations) transforms women’s experiences and their cultural and social environments, and how it shapes, changes, challenges and is shaped by, gender relations.” (2005: 143). The connection between offline and online environments is crucial for feminist praxis in her view, unlike post-modern or cyborg perspectives that offer the possibility of reworked gender positions in virtual environments alone⁵⁵.

Box 7: Online Campaigns addressing VAW

Those social issues that are difficult to pursue in physical spaces are the ones that flourish the most in online media (O’Riordan 2005, Munt et al 2002) This could explain why issues like violence against women have been universally addressed by women’s

⁵⁵ Other studies in this vein also examine the interactions of online and offline spaces such as Shani Orgad’s ethnography of online breast cancer support spaces (2005); Shapiro’s study of transgender organizing (2004) and O Riordan’s study of trans gender identity online (2005); Mohammed and Thombre’s study of coping styles and spaces for HIV affected people (2005); Mehra’s work on how the internet can be used for the empowerment of working class, queer and marginalized communities (2004). The internet makes possible the coming together of a multitude of marginalized voices. For people suffering from illnesses like breast cancer or HIV/AIDS, or stigmatized groups like transgender people, this is most striking. Not only is this a space to share the journey of ill-health, recovery and healing, but it also offers a very real sense of connection and support to users. Moreover, rather than one exemplary ‘celebrity profile’ of a certain disease or condition, the multiplicity of voices on the internet attest to the variety of experiences.

movements across the world though the medium of the internet. There is ICT-led campaign in Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso with young women, who have access to ICTs and who are in communities where female genital mutilation is practiced. There is the use of ICTs in digital storytelling workshops with women writers, journalists, archivists, content developers and activists to document women's experiences of violence.

The globally implemented 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign has online activities such as blog-a-thons encouraging people to blog about gender violence. The Blank Noise Project from India began as a community art event but is now a nationwide urban campaign to address 'eve teasing' or street harassment. The online space organizes offline events where women mobilize and converge in certain locations to physically take over and 'defend' their public space from street harassers. Women can also post photographs of their attackers taken with a mobile phone as well as their experiences⁵⁶.

The internet thus offers spaces to discuss, share and publicize acts of violence that often occur privately but with full public and cultural sanction. Not only do organizations connect with each other to strategise and mobilize, but the internet also gives women spaces to articulate their experiences of violence, spaces that may not always be available offline.

b) Queer Online

The internet has opened up possibilities for the realization of sexuality rights of people with marginalized sexualities – LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex – hereafter referred to as 'queer'), sex workers and the disabled – based on specific features of the internet: the anonymity it affords, the ability to connect large groups of people across different global regions, the opportunity for (mostly) free speech. As with other marginalized groups, the internet has enabled queer movements across the world to organize for their rights, and make crucial interventions in public debates, policies, laws and society to protect their sexuality rights, build identities, network and strategize with other groups and set the stage for the expansion of the idea and practice of sexuality rights.

56 Locations of these examples: [The fight against female circumcision in West Africa transposed on the internet](http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=a&x=95468); <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=a&x=95468>;

The One in Nine Campaign <http://www.oneinnine.org.za/>; <http://www.womensnet.org.za/campaign/one-nine-campaign-solidarity-with-women-who-speak-out>; WENT Africa 2007 workshop on VAW and digital storytelling

http://www.apcwomen.org/news/went_africa_training_digital_storytelling_end_violence_against_women ; in Latin America, Uganda - Speak out against gender

violence - SMS campaign* <http://www.wougnet.org/Alerts/speakoutgenderviolence.html> OR <http://www.preventgbvatfrica.org/>; Blank Noise Project :

www.blog.blanknoise.org; UNIFEM's online campaign : <http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/vaw/>; 16 Days of Activism Addressing Gender Violence:

<http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/16days/home.html>

However the representation of these groups in the existing research literature is uneven, reflecting a variety of offline agendas and conditions. For example, Bryson (2004: 239) notes that queer women are hardly represented in studies on online sexuality although there are a few notable exceptions (see Munt et al 2002). On the other hand, gay men and MSM are widely represented in the available literature, but such research tends to emerge from a public health perspective, exploring the offline risks for violence, STDs and HIV infection that gay men/ MSM face through making online sexual contacts (see Tewksbury 2003 for example).

Queer sexualities are finding greater expression and freedom on the internet, particularly in countries where homosexuals and transgenders are criminalized, or even considered to 'not exist'. In Iran and Sudan, two staunchly Islamic countries, blogs give gay men and transgender people spaces to come out online (Heavens 2008)⁵⁷. While queer groups and collectives have existed before the arrival of the internet, it now allows them to connect to each other across regions and post information towards support and mobilization. As Indian activists battle on with the State to repeal Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes same-sex sexualities, the country's queer men flock to the internet as do men from Brunei to Tibet⁵⁸ to find love, sex, connection, communication.

Cyberspace has also been increasingly popular among queer people in urban areas in Hong Kong and Tang (2006) describes queer life in cyberspace as 'fragmented bodies and

⁵⁷ Homosexuality is a capital offence in Iran, and it was only recently that a gay Iranian teenager was denied asylum in the UK after the Iranian president declared that there are no gays in Iran. See www.gaynewswatch.com for more information. Ali's Sudanese 'black-gay-arab' blog www.black-gay-arab.blogspot.com has links to queer sites in other conservative Muslim countries such as Aswat, the Palestinian lesbian group, Iraqi LGBT groups, Gay Maroc (Gay Morocco) and Helem, the Lebanese 'human rights group' that has rainbow flags and information about Pride all over its website.

⁵⁸ www.utopia-asia.com

technical realities'. Popular websites, chat rooms and bulletin boards act as centres for Hong Kong lesbians to meet, find erotic interests and forge their own political activism. These online spaces are particularly important for women since there are far more commercial gay public venues for men. Tang also discusses how the internet connects diasporic Chinese queers with local Chinese communities. Uniting along ethnic lines provides the Chinese queer diaspora and those in the 'home countries' to actually mobilize online even though there may be disruptions between online enthusiasm and offline impact.

However, what does it mean to be queer online when one cannot be queer offline? What does it mean to actually type out words that name identities and desires, what happens when words are limited or difficult to translate into other languages? How do queer people negotiate this terrain between their online identities and offline realities? Hill discusses the nature of online identity formation studying transgender people in Canada and believes that the promise of a liberated virtual identity is largely hollow, as offline society still has a long way to go in actualizing 'gender freedoms' (2005). Alexander (2002b) who discusses US and South African websites, and Nip (2004) studying the Hong-Kong group Queer Sisters, both raise questions of how community, social agency and change are affected/shaped by an online presence. Offord similarly describes Singaporean gay men's self-representation online as a way to negotiate the rigid boundaries that police private and public spaces (2003). In developing contexts the development of and access to queer online spaces

takes on aspects of globalization, class, locality, social mobility, and culture with the internet offering the potential to imagine 'elsewheres' (after Nisbett 2006), but then how does this shape queer experiences, relationships and entire movements?

The internet offers marginalized groups the opportunity to break out of the silence and shame that surround their lives and to connect with others in empowering ways, and nowhere is this more emphatic than the organizing of transgender people in North America and Western Europe. The closure of sex-clinics in hospitals in the late 1970s (and with it the support services for transgender people) spelled the end of a certain momentum they had gained in achieving social visibility. However, in the mid 1990s the accessibility of the internet led to the revival of transgender movements. A virtual community presence is particularly useful for small non-funded groups, erasing the need for the start-up costs of an offline presence; it allows for the wide dissemination of information; the risks and stigma associated with being out in an offline context are considerably mitigated; organizing and connecting through the internet also allows for the mass mobilization of groups for campaigns and rallies and other offline activities, and this has led to a much greater offline visibility of a once-marginalized group in North America.

Kate O’Riordan (2005) discusses the role of the internet in trans activism in detail, in identity formation and in significantly challenging hegemonic discourses, the activism and outrage around this, and how this has led to actual political change – changes in laws, language and attitude. The other powerful role that online activism has played is in enabling the transgender discourse to move out of the medicalization discourse by giving trans people the opportunity to access their own information about themselves (Shapiro 2004: 171-174). Trans people have traditionally depended on the doctor-patient relationship, and the hierarchy that places the 'expert' voice above that of the individual 'patient'. The internet however offers vast and varied sites of information and education⁵⁹, which allow users to subvert the power dynamics inherent to these hierarchies and institutions. Users

⁵⁹ However the nature of 'information' on the internet or the quality however has also come under question with some authors pointing out that the volume or the quantity does not necessarily translate into quality.

can access information online including that which is not given to them by doctors, and vet their opinions. Thus the internet allows transgender people to access information anonymously, and often for free, considering that the wider offline world can be extremely stigmatizing.

By being anonymous, by fashioning their own versions of themselves – as opposed to uninformed, stereotypical or limited mainstream film, print and televisual representations – the internet offers marginalized users the power of self representation.. However, the choice to remain invisible or to control representation has its ironic reverse. Having a loud and confident online persona does not always translate into an equally confident offline

presence, and this dissonance is a real factor for the personal journeys of users. In the case of breast cancer survivors it tends to reinforce the private nature of women's experiences and bodies, reinforces the privatization of women's struggles and breast cancer as a 'private, domestic drama', and mitigates the idea that women should "change themselves, their attitudes and behaviour, without any recognition that their identities and actions are determined by, and respond to, social conditions..." (Orgad 2005: 154).

This also affects the notion of their personal efficacy and credibility in a wider mainstream space. By being 'active' and 'informed' online, the responsibility for change, for credible and valid representations, for preventive efforts, are transferred from the state/medical

profession/corporations to individuals. While the discursive space of the disease being in the control of cancer survivors themselves is empowering, it is simultaneously disempowering as well for these very reasons. Online spaces can often appear disconnected from social and political contexts and therefore the connections between online and offline activism need to be explored. In the context of transgender organizing for instance, Shapiro finds that her transgender respondents were concerned with the spread of a limiting view of offline realities. Transgender people began to view the virtual community as the 'real' community, often losing sight of the continued ostracism of transgender people in physical spaces and institutions. There is also a tendency towards an inflation of the size of the movement (2004: 176)

Undoubtedly, the internet has presented a significant opportunity for people across the globe to organize around specific personal and collective issues; the potential for women to transform their social and cultural environments through online interactions however are met with justified caution⁶⁰. While it is indeed real that online communities can be positively and actively used (rather than just 'consumed'), critics also find that offline power relations and realities persist online (Orgad 2005). Considering that offline spaces continue to marginalize people within already marginalized communities, how can the most silent voices be heard online? Within the trans community in North America, for example, the least represented are trans people of colour and the differently-abled.

⁶⁰ In their research on Internet lesbian, gay and queer networks in Taiwan and South Korea, Chris Berry and Fran Martin (2003) indicate that the accessibility of the Internet contributes to the emergence of similar communities online. Meanwhile, activists ask whether the anonymity of online identities can be complicating for public community mobilization strategies. Activists can call for meetings on virtual space but when it comes to direct actions, there are always the risks of plans being stalled and lives endangered. Oppressive environments require alternative strategies. Olivia Khoo (2003) describes how lesbians, gays and queers in Malaysia link up with diasporic Malaysians to build community capacity, to share mobilisation strategies and to unsettle marginal positions.

c) The Self-Authoring of Sexuality Online

How have women been represented in cyberspace? How has female sexuality been represented in cyberspace? Jodi Dean (1999) writes that we often make a mistake in assuming that the internet is a completely different medium; it is only a part of a larger media system, she writes, and conventional representation (of women and their sexuality) filters down to this too. Why should it be anything else in the context of cyberspace? But Dean also points out that it is impossible to ignore the fact that a lot more people, women, women of colour are producing and disseminating information on the net than ever before. And it is this that makes the politics of representation in cyberspace distinct: a possibility for self-representation. With Web 2.0, the most recent version of the World Wide Web that is powered by user-generated content, the nature of web content itself has dramatically changed. One of the outcomes of this has been the phenomenon of online self-representation and the self-authoring of sexuality by women. Self-authored sites feature individuals showcasing themselves, their everyday lives, actively producing versions of their sexuality, even if the ways in which they do so may mimic some of the codes established in other media – film, television, pornography etc⁶¹.

The control that the individual has in deciding what the nature of that display is, critically distinguishes it from pornography (Hegland & Nelson 2002)⁶². DeVoss (2002) suggests that women-owned and women-authored sites bring agency to the women authors themselves, giving them the option to edit, control and choose what they display and how they display it, represent themselves, communicate with viewers, all unlike traditional pornography where static photographs or films made with little involvement of the women themselves. Self-authored sites feature women in a range of positions, poses, dress, mostly just in their everyday habitats and contexts. Moreover, self-authored sites do not rely on the perfect, airbrushed imagery that features in pornography, but instead feature 'subversive forms of femininity' or even just everyday femininity (DeVoss 2002: 88-89; Magnet 2007: 593).

Box 8: CamGirls & Suicide Girls

⁶¹ For example, male cross-dressers' sites serve many purposes, as personal journals, as a space to form a community, or to display themselves - very expressly - for the consumption of others.

⁶² To begin with, it may be relevant to make a distinction between sexual representation in the form of pornography and self-representation itself. To briefly clarify, pornography is a representation - of sex, of sexiness, of women, of men etc -and even when pornography depicts actual sexual acts it is still just a representation. Pornography therefore is not actually sex (or sexiness or sexuality) itself, it is just one set of signs taken together to stand in for sex (Hall 1997: 16-18). But self representations do not stand in for anything else, they are not really 'representations' but refers to the 'real thing' - the individual - who is displaying themselves sexually or in some other way. In that sense, there is a clear distinction between sexual self-representation and pornography, although both may be sexual in content. For these reasons the term 'self-authorship' is perhaps more appropriate, or as DeVoss refers to them, they are 'identity projects' (2002: 76).

The late 1990s' phenomenon of cam-girls - women who use web-cameras to broadcast their everyday lives to viewers - and the recently popular Suicide Girls (www.suicidegirls.com) are self-authored diaries, memoirs, or showcases for women's everyday lives and their sexuality⁶³. Cam-girls sites have a home-made aesthetic, offering the viewer a chance to engage the woman's entire personality and not just her sexuality depending on the nature of the content she uploads. Viewers can watch a cam-girl in only as much sexual content as she wants to display, and by existing accounts this is not the point of why cam-girls broadcast themselves anyway (Senfst 2000). Suicide Girls is a professionally and commercially run site featuring a particular sub-culture – predominantly white, able-bodied, tattooed, pierced and punk women - in sensual, sexual contexts, with strong communities of fans formed around a Suicide Girl's identities and interests. The Suicide Girls are self-identified feminists, aligned with feminist organizations and causes that are advertised on their website. Suicide Girls display a range of sexualities, not restricting themselves to 'gay' or 'straight' or 'bi' categories, but tend to express their own desires and sexualities in a more fluid – and queer – manner. Both cam-girls sites and the Suicide Girls are up on the internet expressly for viewing pleasure, however both types of sites come with features that give the impression of women's agency and their control of sexual self representations. By being so obviously sexual, and flowing 'non-stop' (as in cam-girls that broadcast 24x7), these sites are

63 JenniCam by Jennifer Ringley was the first camgirl site to receive fame and popularity; it started as a way for Jennifer to stay in touch with her family while she was away at University, and then developed into a non-stop 'broadcast' for 7 years. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JenniCam> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3360063.stm> on the demise of JenniCam; <http://www.artech.ab.ca/pbrown/jenni/jenni.html> and <http://www.mefedia.com/tags/jennicam/> that have archived the broadcasts from Jenni's camera

tweaking the idea of what is 'private'. While women's diary-writing has a long and historic tradition across the world, these have always been private. The public sphere has typically been a male space, for male accomplishments, for rational, civic activities, and the private sphere has been the female domain of relationships, care and intimacy. The internet upturns all of this. From cam-girls to women diarists, the flow is reversed and women's intimate selves are now very much in a public space (DeVoss 2002: 77-81; Karlsson 2007). Such self-authored sites also challenge the notion of the male/masculinized gaze, undoing the idea of the distant male spectator that has characterized much of the discourse around the portrayal of women's images (Senft 2000; White 2003; Magnet 2007).

In cam-girl sites the viewer is often given a sense of Big Sister watching him, usually through the ways in which the cam-girl designs the webcam frame using graphic depictions of keyhole with the viewer on the wrong side of the keyhole; a pair of elaborately made up eyes unblinkingly watching the water; binoculars pointing out at the viewer (White 2003: 21-22). He does not have control of the image as a typical voyeur does, nor can he really choose what version he wants to see; the viewer has to watch what the owner decides she will display. This fact overturns the prevailing idea of women's 'looked-at-ness', significantly challenges traditions of photography of women, and women become the subjects and objects of their own gaze (Magnet 2007: 580).

In both cam-girls sites and Suicide Girls, the women themselves are very much in charge of what goes on in front of the camera, and behind it. For example, cam-girls who feel threatened or stalked by viewers use specific strategies and tactics to reject, challenge and block offenders. For example Michele White discusses how some cam girls will ban certain offending viewers; others state clearly that they do not do things 'on demand' for viewers and explicitly state what they *will not do*; some state that their cameras are switched off when they do not want to be seen (with no explanations as to why – it is none of the viewer's business why the cam-girls' camera is off); others use verbal criticism and sarcasm to regulate offending viewers (2003: 15-16). Suicide Girls who face harassment however are less likely to feel safe since their online role involves the formation of a community of fans. Girls who feel threatened often just 'drop out' for a while or restrict the personal information they post (Magnet 2007: 587).

The phenomenon of sexual self-authorship closely resembles the feminist utopias Haraway and Turkle imagined in how they offer 'multiple viewpoints' and the promise of knowing the self which is indeed a multiplicity of identities. This form of self-authorship is most common in the West; yet, the Japanese version of 'net idols', similar to cam-girls are extremely popular (Senfst 2000), as are Chinese women's sex blogs that have earned them enough notoriety to be shut down for violating censorship norms (Chien 2005). There has been a

growing and strong tradition of Chinese-American and Korean-American feminist women who challenge racial-sexual stereotyping of Asian women and attempt to project alternate, personalized, transgressive, sexualities that counter popular cultural stereotypes (Hudson 2007)⁶⁴. However, the mainstream commercial sites such as Suicide Girls tend to overwhelmingly feature white models. Shoshana Magnet describes how racial and ethnic diversity is limited on the site, in addition to the stereotyping of different racial sexualities in a way that lends itself to commodification rather than inclusion or plurality (2007: 588-592).

And the final question remains: is this the same old commodification and objectification of women, albeit in a different garb? The authors of these studies tend to agree, with Senfst saying that in the context of consumerism and branding, even transgressive representations are still eventually pornographic (2000); Devoss echoes this view that even the greatest agency cannot take away from the fact that the women bloggers and diarists are still up 'for purchase' (2002:90). Michele White's work on webcam-girls however diverges from this reading, believing instead that the feminist idea that women authors are merely offering themselves up for male consumption works to take agency away from them and makes them 'distressingly invisible' (2003:11). She says: "Treating the work of women webcam operators and other internet producers as significant forms of cultural production suggests the vital role that women play in technological aspects of culture. Women's webcams offer a setting in which to emphasize women's employment of the internet and a means to rethink other aspects of their cultural representation". (24)

d) The Politics of Representation in Cyberspace

Debates around representation of female sexuality have largely been contested around the terrain of pornography. The definition of pornography itself has been contested. Legal and State definitions include "sexually explicit representation" or depictions that are "obscene", a particularly controversial and subjective matter, given that what is culturally and socially considered "obscene" differs across contexts and time and is surrounded by politics of morality/religion/patriarchy (at one time, for example, distribution of pamphlets on contraception was banned on grounds of obscenity)⁶⁵. Liberal feminists like Nadine

64 Such as Big Bad Chinese Mama (www.bigbadchinesemama.com), Yelloh Girls (www.yellohgirls.com), Bamboo Girl (www.bamboogirl.com) and others. Big Bad Chinese Mama actually fashions itself as a 'mock mail order bride' site with a clearly feminist agenda, also featuring the owner's erotic images of herself (Hudson 2007). Again however, these sites have possibly gained attention and popularity because of their location in the USA, and the strength of the Far-East-Asian diaspora there. However these are by no means niche sites, with BBCM ranking in the top ten in a Google search for 'mail order brides'.

65 "I can't define pornography," an American judge (Justice Stewart) famously said, "but I know it when I see it." Definitions from the stable of radical feminists include: "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words, that subordinates women" (Mackinnon, Dworkin, 1984; 1988); "that physically or psychologically violates the personhood of one of the participants" (Longino, 1980); depiction involving "the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female . . . as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually," (Longino, 1980); and "propaganda" that promote "hatred and contempt for women" (Brownmiller, 1975). O'Toole challenges anti-porn positions of Andrea Dworkin/ Catherine Mackinnon, and opines that the negative stereotypes of porn exist because of unfamiliarity with the genre, and because of moralist/theocratic reasons, suggesting that legislative restrictions on porn are a "freedom of speech issue" if porn is seen as "an alternative viewpoint".

Strossen (1993) have opposed these understandings of pornography (which implicitly call for a ban on such material) offering the following arguments. First is the fundamental liberal argument that freedom of speech is a necessary condition for human freedom, and censorship is a greater threat than pornography.

Secondly the suppression of pornography will hurt women too, because what is 'degrading' is also subjective. Strossen argues that the State such a vague definition may be used against homosexual and lesbian materials, or even feminist classics⁶⁶. Other concerns raised are that "anti-pornography crusades" perpetuate the image of women as victims who need to be protected, and that they are also in danger of being used by conservatives to strengthen the power of the religious right (McElroy, 1995). Liberal feminists also contend that the hysteria around pornography diverts attention from "real issues that confront women" and that censorship will erase women's history of oppression. However these do not take on the ideological underpinnings of pornography or the impact that these might have⁶⁷. These are essentially debates against censorship and do not address the central problems of representation and power in pornography, nor do they address the issues of violence within forms of pornography.

While the debate on pornography is itself somewhat saturated, new questions are emerging, and these have been particularly in the context of the internet. For example, is internet pornography a different set of practices around sex and sexuality? Is internet porn different from traditional porn? While definitions of porn, or cyber-porn, still matter to some degree, more relevant to porn on the internet are (old) debates around whether viewing of porn has an impact, that some cause-and-effect is involved, that there is some connection between watching porn and illicit/dangerous/violent activities that pose a threat to women and society (Mehta, 1998). Inconclusive as that debate may be, research concerning effects of porn consistently show that "it is the violence, rather than the sex in pornography that is harmful" (Gossett and Byrne, 2002). Much of the porn on the net has been merely a digitization of existing print and video pornography (Mehta and Plaza, 1997) but Barak and Fisher (1997) locate net erotica as a new and unique medium of pornography due to its interactive capabilities. Gossett and Byrne (2002) write that most research on net-porn focuses on distinguishing between violent and non violent porn. In that respect, it is disturbing to note that some studies have shown that porn on the net is more violent (Barron and Kimmel 2000) especially in cross-race sexual interactions (Cowan and Campbell 1994; Dines, Jensen and Russo, 1998).

66 For example, texts like *Our Bodies Our Selves* (with its explicit representation of the female body), Kate Millet's novel on sexual torture or Brownmiller's history of rape

67 Susan Brownmiller writes, "Yet the very same liberals who were so quick to understand the method and purpose behind the mighty propaganda machine of Hitler's Third Reich . . . now fervently maintain that the hatred and contempt for women that find expression in four-letter words used as expletives and in what are quaintly called 'adult' or 'erotic' books and movies are a valid extension of freedom of speech that must be preserved as a Constitutional right." (32).

These however do not address other questions raised by feminists from other parts of the world about the over-significant role given to pornography in overall questions of representations of women. Indian feminists have often made the point that the overwhelming anxiety over pornography does not really represent what may be ‘obscene’, and Western feminists (as well as the State and law) cannot speak for feminists from other parts of the world. They have raised questions over the representation of women as servile, obese, objects of male domination within cinema and literature and asked if this is not ‘obscene’. (Anklesaria 2006; Agnes 2006; Jaisingh 2006). Are graphic representations of sexuality ‘worse’ than other types of representation? The anxieties in cyberspace mirror this overrepresentation of pornography in debates on the representation of women. More critically though, the question of freedom of speech versus legal measures to contain what ‘harms’ women or constitutes violence/‘pornography’ continues seamlessly from the offline debates onto the online world, and perhaps might even be more relevant in the context of cyberspace.

Box 9: The Woman’s Erotic Gaze⁶⁸

Terrie Schauer (2005) undertakes a textual analysis and visual de-coding of nine pornographic sites, three of which are supposed to be for women, based on a Butlerian/Foucauldian discourse analysis rather than the framework used by anti-porn academics such as Catherine MacKinnon⁶⁹. So what is so significant about porn for women? Schauer observes that some amount of conviction is broken by giving women a ‘viewing place’ thereby opening up the subjectivity of women, as opposed to being merely objects for viewing pleasure. Through her analysis she discovers that the images used in the porn sites for heterosexual women are a muddling of images from two distinct genres – gay men’s and heterosexual men’s pornography, implying that unique visual codes for an “erotic female gaze” have still not evolved. Women’s porn is a “cultural work-in-progress” where depicting men or sex for the pleasure of women is still largely uncharted territory⁷⁰.

68 In an intersection with gaming studies, a little explored area is how queer women respond to the sexualized imagery of women in games; while the women in the studies cited here felt that they were not reflected in gaming imagery, what about the women who actively consume the images of other women – through television, games, movies etc?

69 By this, Schauer means that she is seeing porn as “merely a modern representation of sexuality (which) plays a role in determining what is pleasure” and not a form of violence where the assumption is that there is something like a “normal female sexuality” that is devoid of violence/dominance, and is “free, non aggressive, non phallic and lightly lesbian (Butler 1997 in Schauer 2005:45)”.

70 It also would seem that some of these studies /researchers, particularly those in North America, ignore the vast and rich history of erotica and pornography for women that have existed in print in that region from the 1930s-1960s. Lesbian thrillers and romances, pulp crime fiction and pulp-sex stories were all silently being consumed by women even if they were not the target market. Morgan (2003) has an excellent unpublished doctoral thesis on the history of pulp literature, in addition to other publications available, on the history of pulp and particularly on pulp for women. See also <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/bingham/guides/lesbianpulp/> and <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/feat/archives/2008/08/10/2003419914> for more information.

Claire Butkus' unique interview (2004) with CJ and Susanna⁷¹, two women providers of porn, reveals that they do consciously make some efforts to cater to this erotic female gaze, and in fact have some sense of what women might want. CJ and Susanna share details about their own businesses and how they go about choosing images which they feel are 'women positive' or 'relationship positive': using ordinary people and not porn stars; acts where the woman actor actually reveals enjoyment on her face; showing the male body, and, "oddly enough, the male face"; and images that use props and sets to stage a 'scene', rather than just portray an empty act. 'Women positive' images exclude acts "where the woman is not in control of the situation, not enjoying the situation, or participating in the act without consent". They also elaborate on existing "misinformation on women's porn" – that women will not pay for porn, do not watch porn, or are uninterested in adult entertainment⁷² – perhaps because women themselves are reluctant to talk about their engagement with these.

Also changing the terms of the debates on female sexual representation in cyberspace is the phenomenon of women-owned porn sites, and porn sites for women, still only mostly on the internet. Studies like these reveal that it is in the production and consumption of internet porn that questions of the erotic female gaze and exploration of female sexuality are coming to the fore. Although the voices of women porn providers are emerging, that of women porn consumers is still missing. Kimberlianne Podlas (2000) notes that there is a need for 'thick description' on how women engage with sexually explicit content. Similarly, while there are pornographic sites aimed expressly at lesbian/bisexual/queer women there is little published material on the production and consumption of these sites (see Bryson 2004 for this discussion).

New local articulations, representations and exchanges of porn are visible from diverse regional locations. What may have once been a 'local flavour' is now accessible internationally. The Japanese 'boy love' comics and Hentai are the most well known – they now have a world-wide fan following. Other regions have also begun to spin their own porn fables and self-publish on the internet. 'Savita bhabhi'⁷³ in India has begun to create a ripple amongst an international audience and news of its success has made it to the New York Times and the BBC. But while available in the borderless scapes of cyberspace for

71 The interview came about when two female porn site operators CJ and Susanna responded to a forwarded email regarding Convergence's call for articles for a special issue on internet and sexuality and expressed interest in sharing their experience.

72 "There are ENOUGH women interested in adult material," they emphatically state, "The beauty of online erotica is the ability to remain anonymous, you don't have to tell your neighbour or best friend if you masturbated to a live video or fantasized about being with one of the characters. We conduct many anonymous surveys on our web sites, and our results are very different to the answers women give verbally. We *know* that many women like adult entertainment."

73 Savita Bhabhi (www.savitabhabhi.com) is the porn-esque comic strip about a bored middle class housewife and her encounters with a range of local characters from neighbourhood boys coming to retrieve a cricket ball, to an underwear salesman, and a visiting cousin from abroad.

international consumption these are also born very much in their own social contexts – the makers/ producers of Savita bhabhi are anonymous. No one knows or has been able to track who the creators are. Given the fear of the moral police, and the current sensitive regimes of morality, this is unsurprising. Alternatively, this also poses a problem: had the content been vicious, hate-ridden or misogynistic, the inability to track its source may have been a serious concern. There is no doubt such locally produced sexual and erotic spaces can proliferate on the internet.

3. The Constructions of Online Harm

“Harm” has overwhelmingly been the unifying thread underlying most research on sexuality and the internet – though framed differently for men and women, and uniquely framed for children⁷⁴. Earlier studies like those of Alvin Cooper (1999) especially from the disciplines of psychology and psychotherapy posed sexual exploration on the internet as an essentially harmful activity (for men) as it raised possibilities of addiction, sexual compulsivity and pathologies. Other than individual harm to the self, public harm was also feared as studies explored the impact of such male behaviour, and within this subset, gay male behaviour (Tewkesbury 2003); thus situating harm in the realm of HIV and STIs on one hand, and in ‘relationship problems’ on the other (Renshaw 2007; Morahan Martin 2000), with explorations of whether cybersex was construed by the (non surfing) partner as infidelity and led to divorces. Women were fleetingly researched in studies that examined psychological impact on them because of the porn-viewing habits of their partners (Whitty 2003, 2005).

For women however, the harm that the internet poses has been parallel to those they experience in real life. In fact this is a recurring question within feminist research in this area. How different is the virtual world from the real world in terms of gender relations and the structural subjugation of women? Lisa-Jane McGerty (2000) questions this ‘false

74 The notion of online/cyber harm for children is quite explicitly defined by ECPAT in its report on its report on violence to children in cyberspace, a contribution to the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children (2005:4). The definition of harm according to this report is:

- The production, distribution and use of materials depicting child sexual abuse.
- Online solicitation or ‘grooming’ (securing a child’s trust in order to draw them into a situation where they may be harmed).
- Exposure to materials that can cause psychological harm, lead to physical harm, or facilitate other detriment to a child.
- Harassment and intimidation, including bullying.

dichotomy' of seeing net users as online or offline rather than their being rooted in both worlds simultaneously, citing it as a primary reason for "have(ing) failed to locate ICTs adequately within fundamental relations of gender, race and class". She writes, "the two realms are not distinct and theory should not pretend that they are by disregarding the fact that an individual can never be online without being offline too."

The major understanding of harm to women in the context of ICTs has therefore followed feminist engagement with harm offline, and been in the context of pornography and violence against women. Academics like Donna Hughes take the feminist-abolitionist position⁷⁵ on prostitution and pornography popularized in the 1960s and 70s by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon and posit it in the context of cyberspace. In a particularly comprehensive paper she details the range of ways in which new information and communication technologies are being used to facilitate sexual exploitation of women and children, which she defines as "trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, commercial sex acts, such as prostitution, pornography, live sex shows, stalking for purposes of sexual assault or abuse, and all forms of child sexual abuse" (Hughes 2002). Hughes identifies various technologies and their specific applications that "enable sexual predators to harm or exploit women and children efficiently and anonymously"⁷⁶. Hughes uses examples of well-known cases of child abuse picked up by the media to make her points, and she notes that ironically, the focus of governments have been on protecting children, but have done little to stop the sexual exploitation of women.

Kathleen Maltzahn (2006) raises other questions around the use of ICTs in trafficking of women: is the transmission of sexually exploitative images, without consent of the women concerned, trafficking? She points to the need to examine the scope of trafficking with new dimensions being added by the use of the internet in abetting a range of crimes. Maltzahn observes that traffickers are able to organize transnational border crossings through digital networks and email, or circumvent national regulations by transmitting images from other unregulated regions⁷⁷ or advertise girls 'coming soon' to their markets and get an idea of the demand for them, thereby making trafficking much more demand-responsive and efficient. This may be true in countries which have more developed information and communication systems, like in the case of Eastern Europe or parts of South East Asia or in situations of organized crime, but in developing countries from which the largest segment

75 That these are inherently a form of violence against women and by definition are degrading, humiliating and debasing to women, and should be completely banned.

76 These include: digital technologies that enable cheaper and quicker production and distribution of pornographic images; interactive DVDs that enable users to actively participate in acts of exploitation/subjugation; Usenet groups where men can exchange information on where to find women/ children for exploitation; web sites to distribute pornography or advertise sex tourism or market images of rape and sexual slavery; chat rooms through IRC channels, ICQ, MUDs where predators are known to have contacted children for online and offline meetings resulting in abuse; file transfer protocol (FTP) which enables file sharing between computers, used by child pornography collectors to share images; live video chats; as well as technologies of cyber hijacking and softwares that increase levels of anonymity and guard users from being tracked.

77 The example of Japanese girls brought to Honolulu to give live sexual performances, transmitted through the net via service providers in California for an audience in Japan, all to avoid Japanese regulations

of 'trafficking victims' emerge, traffickers are still recruiting on-the-ground in ways they always have: in informal labour markets, migratory streams or through village and kin networks (Kelly, cited in Maltzahn, 2006).

Indhu Rajagopal and Nis Bojin (2003) focus on the unique characteristics of the internet that explain how and why pornography is flourishing in this medium: digitization (which makes it easy to produce pornographic images at low cost even within the privacy of homes and upload and transfer them with no time lag or costs), unregulated commercialization, virtual communities created by techno-social interactions, users' anonymity, facilities for product customization and instant international production, and absence of legal constraints. They place this alongside a review of theoretical understandings of commodification to indicate that the internet has intensified the process of commodification and "differentiated the products of the body for consumption", noting that images consumed are more of women and girls rather than men and boys. This then, according to them, is the real 'harm' that the medium has facilitated – by making pornography easier to produce and disseminate, and intensifying porn as a way of commodifying the body in the market. Rather than the medium itself (though this medium "is indispensable for fostering this market") Rajagopal and Bojin feel that it is the economics of commodification, and "vulgar instinct and sadistic demand" that need to be looked at.

Part of the debate however is essentially whether the medium really matters. Trafficking, pornography and sexual exploitation are all rooted in very real structural and gender inequalities. These studies look at internet as a technology, as a medium that exacerbates violations against women that already exist on the ground. But is the internet *expanding* the range of violations experienced by women? Are there entirely new forms of violence or exploitation that have emerged with the internet? Philips and Morrissey (2004) write that the internet has led to "development of new angles on old crimes and created a whole new arena for cruelty and fear," like cyber-stalking. They find that documentation of cases of cyber-stalking are limited and research on this new form is still in its nascent stages⁷⁸. They write that because of the lack of clarity on cyber-stalking in law, "protection for victims of this kind of abuse is dangerously inadequate." Sharmila Joshi (2009, forthcoming) also looks at cases of cyber-stalking in India and finds similar inadequacies. Additionally she finds that in the case of cultures where a sexual politics of shame and honour operate, the harms of stigmatization and defamation are magnified.

78 They define cyber-stalking as a spectrum of targeted and abusive behaviour that ranges from "online harassment, obscene emails, unsolicited porn, spam, posting of false personal ads advertising the victim's availability for sex, (which) may escalate to threats of, or actual, sexual violence and death". Reactions to these also vary – from annoyance to fear of life. Case studies they quote include a woman being shot by an unknown man who had fallen in love with her, gotten enraged after seeing her with her boyfriend, created love and hate websites in her name, gotten her personal details off the net including where she worked and shot her as she left work. GenderIT.Org has further resources on violence against women online which can be accessed here: <http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=i90501-e--1>

Some have alluded to the harm of violent acts in gaming and chat rooms. Caroline Bassett (1995) looks at a MUD gaming system, Lambda MOO where 'virtual bodies' interact with one another in expanding/contracting, public/private 'rooms. Bassett finds that erotic language and imagery is used often, consensual cyber-sex is common but while playful violence, even "killing" is acceptable, users look down on "rape" and evict such users from the room with disapproval. There are also much-publicized cases of virtual rape (and many other forms of violence) on *Second Life* and in other simulated and game-playing environments (Sipress 2007). An Amnesty International campaign in Spain on 'discrimination and violence against women in the most popular video games' found assault, murder, rape, slavery and torture in games, many of which were freely accessible to minors (Maltzahn 2006).

In an interesting twist, Fulda (2002) has looked at harm to those targeted as 'paedophiles'. The line between fantasy and reality, or thinking something and actually doing it, and how it intersects with the law is explored in his paper *Do internet stings directed at paedophiles capture offenders or create offenders?* He examines available evidence of online sting operations to assess if they actually catch paedophiles and prevent future illicit activity, or merely separate out those who only fantasize about it and would never have brushed against the law if there was no internet (and therefore pose no real harm to society). He finds that the overwhelming majority of those caught in sting operations have no history of wrongdoing. The stings end up "destroying careers at best and lives at worst" and creating a new class of offenders where the actual crime committed is controversial – can you be convicted for your fantasies, he asks? Is intent or thoughts enough to make a man a criminal? Christina Sharpe (1999) also briefly touches on this aspect when she writes about how the net allows for the acting out of racist, sexist or class-ist fantasies, as confessions like "I killed a migrant" reveal; on the internet this fantasy can be played out, though not necessarily acted out in reality.

Some feminists have had more cynical responses to these constructions of harm for women using the internet. Jodi Dean sets the tone for this in her 1999 paper 'Virtual Fears' (1999) where she comments on the hyped-up fear of the 'threat of the internet' expressed by some (Slouka, 1995; Zizek, 1997; Sirius 1998 cited in Dean 1999) that it disrupts the distinction between natural and virtual, and will replace all that is 'authentic'. Dean suspects that what lies at the centre of this fear-mongering is actually anxiety that the internet challenges 'reality' (defined by Dean as "a set of normative assumptions about how the world should be") and destabilizes authority. She looks at the metaphors used to depict this (infection through 'viruses') and the points of alarm (sexual violence against children and the un-safety of women), noting that these have always been commonly used historically to push for regulation. Besides legal regulations, the scary image of the internet has an

automatic regulatory effect⁷⁹: it pushes parents and librarians to seek filtering software, prevents women from accessing the net, and prevents women online from exploring cyberspace fully or confidently, acting as a tool to “keep (women) in line when they are online” drawing on fears that are already familiar to us. As Flanagan writes, “...the rhetoric surrounding internet violence is potentially damaging to women’s efforts in cyberspace, as the rhetoric itself can act as a tool of terrorization...” (2000: 76).

Box 10: A Queer Women’s e-Group

Looking back on the past ten years Sonali Gulati, the founder and moderator of *Desi Dykes*⁸⁰, the first e-group for queer South Asian women, talks of some issues for women organizing and finding spaces online⁸¹. Sonali began *Desi Dykes* in 1998, initially as an email group, in order to connect about 12-16 South Asian queer women living between Boston and New York who were looking for friends and a community. This small group began to grow as news of it spread by word-of-mouth and women across the United States began writing in asking if they could also join. At present *Desi Dykes* roughly has a membership of over 500 women from India, Pakistan, America, Canada, Britain, Australia, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The members either live in South Asia or belong to South Asian diasporas in Northern countries.

Anonymity is really what allows the list to thrive and grow according to Gulati. She believes that giving women the space to be anonymous online allows them to feel secure when their offline realities are not. Many women on the group are not out about their sexual identities and this privacy is something to be protected. “And it is not just about being South Asian, that our cultures can be quite un-accepting of queer sexuality. I find this need for anonymity quite strong in similar list serves for Latinas and Chinese women as well. It is about being queer and feeling marginalized.” Sonali understands these needs only too well since she herself has been out about her sexuality only recently, therefore it is something she wants to protect quite clearly. Thus the central issue Sonali discusses is safety for women in this cyber-community, and in knowing how to identify the different kinds of harm that women are vulnerable to. The greatest threat Sonali perceives comes from men who want to meet queer women, or men attempting to get on to the group for their own voyeuristic indulgence; both these types of situations have happened before. In the first few years of *Desi Dykes* Sonali accidentally approved membership to a man who gave false information on the screening questionnaire by masquerading as a woman. She discovered this only when friends from *Desi Dykes* moderating *another* queer South Asian group noticed discrepancies in postings from this individual as he was making references

79 Also see this page that discusses how newer business models threaten the freedom of speech on the internet; in an attempt to create subscriptions for certain popular sites in order for ISPs to make more money, one of the tactics being used is to pursue the idea that the internet is a “place full of child pornography and other horrible illegal activity in order to get people on their [the ISP’s] side once they start restricting it and make it ‘safer,’”: http://www.americanfreepress.net/html/canada_net_censorship.html

80 *Desi*: Hindustani word for local, native, South Asian.

81 Based on a Skype interview with Sonali Gulati conducted by Indra Maya Ganesh on December 28, 2008.

to conversations on *Desi Dykes* while 'being a man' on the other South Asian groups. Of course, Sonali immediately had him barred and became more vigilant about her screening procedures.

Recently, in 2008, while in New Delhi and helping organize the city's first Queer Pride March Sonali did an interview with the Hindustan Times newspaper hoping to get coverage for the event and to popularize *Desi Dykes*. She received 450 email requests for membership in one day. Following this she did a phone screening of applicants to ensure that they were in fact women but found that many were men. "While I know that something like a phone screening or a questionnaire potentially dissuades women from signing on, it was something I absolutely had to do in order to maintain the security of the space. I can't run the risk of it being violated again." Again, the internet offers spaces for expression under the cover of anonymity but it simultaneously opens up the risk of abuse. Another curious context of safety and harm came up as well. *Desi Dykes* is hosted on Yahoogroups, which places an age restriction on membership: all members have to be at least 18 years old. In one instance a girl who was seventeen-and-a-half years old sent an urgent request to join the group because her parents had found her with her girlfriend and were threatening to throw her out of the home. Yahoogroups blocked her entry to the group but Sonali had to negotiate with the Yahoogroups administration and the group members to allow this young person to become a member and find at least one supportive space she could access.

Other ways in which the privacy of the members is respected is through mainstreaming certain ground rules: that new members remain on 'moderate mode' for a few weeks so

that she can monitor their posts; having to ask permission from the group before forwarding conversations or postings on *Desi Dykes* on any other list, or forwarding any emails to anyone else outside the group; and not to out people who are on the list when meeting/connecting with others online or offline. “There are many ways information can slip through the cracks online and one has to be vigilant and encourage people to regulate their own behaviour. It’s a fine line and it’s easy to become quite authoritarian, but the instances are few and far between thankfully” she says. In the end, Sonali feels it is worth the effort to ensure that the space is safe for queer women. “There are so many women who write in with their gratitude for this space; some have even been suicidal and depressed at the time when they heard about the group, so it has really helped give queer women a very real sort of lifeline. I am always amazed and touched by how powerful this cyber community has become.”

Debates on what is ‘obscene’, what is ‘harmful’ are to some extent also subjective. Yet ironically, it is the perception of safety that keeps people going to the internet in relation to matters of sexuality. ‘People tend to feel “personally and technically secure” in computer-mediated communication and see a low risk in engaging in sexually explicit communication online (Witmer 1997). However, the security of anonymity is counterbalanced by the risks of not knowing who you are speaking to, as image management online can involve deceptions over basic characteristics such as age, appearance and occupation (Kibby 2001a).

Despite these contradictions, some academics have moved beyond the ‘perils paradigm’ and begun to talk about how even though the dangers of the net mirror and magnify some

parts of everyday anti-women life, this cannot be a barrier to women roaming the streets of cyberspace and discovering its pleasures. Kibby (2001b) for example discusses the often-used analogy between the 'frontier' of Internet communication and the night, both a time/space surrounded in a discourse of danger for women. She writes: "Participation in adult conferences is, in effect, taking back the night: experiencing the danger and excitement, the forbidden expressions of sexuality, the risky liaisons." A Juliet Breeze cartoon shows a middle-aged woman at the computer in the early hours of the morning: her sweatshirt is emblazoned with the feminist slogan "Take back the night!" and she is exploring the dark alleys of the Internet (in Pollock & Sutton 1999: 40). While in real life though, harm for women has been more widely interpreted and located in structures, institutions, attitudes and cultures, in the context of the internet harm has remained restricted to dangers to women in terms of sexual predation and violence.

Newer studies like that of Brubaker and Johnson (2008) and Day and Keys (2008) offer some direction to expand our understanding of harm in the context of the internet, and de-link it from danger to female sexuality only. Brubaker and Johnson make sense of the deluge of erectile enhancement advertisements in spam emails and networks, and write that these construct a crisis of masculinity and then, follow it up by selling a solution. While the erectile enhancement discourse suggests new ways of constructing masculinity (by consumption, or by more stress on body linked to an 'appropriate' gender identity) it also reasserts hegemonic ideals like phallocentrism, 'Othering' and the domination of women. In the past, a number of studies have looked at online eating disorder support groups (trying to deal with and overcome these disorders) but Day and Keys look at the emergence of pro-eating disorder websites which provide opportunities "for those who practice self starvation and purging to converse and swap tips online". By examining materials downloaded from these sites, the authors find that there is an ongoing creation and perpetuation of a problematic discourse on these sites on body image⁸². Feminism perhaps needs to take a larger look at the feminist project, including a macro perspective of the range of "harm" being created on the net. It may also be more useful to talk about safety than harm, a strategy that tends to push policy in a more positive way. Like safety for women in public spaces has to be "strategically produced" (Phadke, 2005) so does safety for women on the internet.

⁸² See also this news story about Eating Disorder Charities and NGOs calling on MySpace and Facebook to regulate pro-eating disorder groups and information:
<http://jezebel.com/360379/should-sites-like-facebook-ban-pro-ana-internet-groups>

Part III: CONCLUSION

1. Sexuality and the Internet: Summing Up

a) Focus on the Global North

Research on gender, women, sexuality and internet is concentrated in technologically advanced nations where the fabric of everyday life is largely virtual. Thus, countries in Western Europe, North America, Australia, Korea, China and Japan are the preferred sites for the study of internet behaviour. The existing research from here spans a broad range: from quantitative studies of online behaviour to psychological and social impact assessments to more development-oriented studies focusing on marginalized and poor populations, to a rich cache of work that straddles cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, health, women's studies, education, policy, technology, new media and feminist studies. There is a rich multi- and inter-disciplinary body of work on sexuality, women and the internet, especially from Australia, North America and Western Europe.

The smattering of research from, and focused on, women in other parts of the world bears a significant difference from research from the North. In the global South, most academic research emerges primarily from a development paradigm; the emphasis is less on the lived cultural experiences of gender, technology, bodies and virtuality, and more about specific ICT4D (ICT for Development) projects reaching out to marginal, rural populations for educational and livelihoods projects (Sreekumar 2007; Davis 2004; Best & Maier 2007; Pillsbury & Mayer 2005; Vogt & Chen 2004 – to name just a few). This is only to be expected considering that women's access to ICTs in these regions is extremely limited compared to the West, and that less of their lives are lived online. This occurs primarily because the 'developing women and ICTs discourse' is seen in terms of "promoting development, offering women opportunities for entering the workforce and become involved in enterprise" (Gillard et al 2008:265). Thus the emphasis in regions like Africa, the Middle East, and in parts of Asia is on quantitative research on women's actual access to the internet, and qualitatively documenting the reasons for their lack of access, and developing programs that could encourage women to use ICTs⁸³. A few of these, as noted in this report, address issues of gender, violence and sexuality.

83 For example, a brief look at UNIFEM's support to ICTs and gender in the Middle Eastern region reveals that the emphasis is on women's access to the internet and the use of technologies for women's economic participation and livelihoods;

<http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/databases/aaw/act.asp?lookup=1&Themes=Economic%20Participation>

b) The ‘Dangers and Delights’ Paradigm

Sexuality and the internet is a reasonably well-studied theme in the North, although from very specific perspectives and often with various agendas. A recurring theme of binaries is evident as sexuality on the internet is seen as offering pleasure but often with a host of attendant risks. Studies view internet sexuality as oscillating between ‘exploration’ and ‘pathological expression’ (Cooper et al 1999), as having ‘two faces’ (Barak & King 2000), being a space of ‘dangers and delights’ (Renshaw 2007) or either a ‘creative play space or destructive addiction’ (Dryer & Lijtmaer 2007); or, for women in particular, a space of ‘promise and perils’ (Morahan-Martin 2000).

Glancing through a list of journal titles and article titles, it appears that psychology, psychiatry, health and medicine-related fields, legal, and inter-disciplinary versions of these are dominant spaces for the publication of studies of sexuality and the internet. These journals⁸⁴ are more likely to carry research studies that are more quantitative, focused rigorously on specific behaviours, studies with little ‘thick’ descriptions. These studies of sex on the internet tend to mirror offline sex research, using a ‘counting method’ of who did what to who, in what position, how many times etc. The studies reviewed here looked at a range of issues addressed in this manner: sexual activity, pornography, use of the internet for sexual health and health information, for escort services, for young people’s sex education, in terms of sexual health risk for gay men. There is a great deal of attention from the social and mental health sciences to classify online sexual behaviours into ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ (McCreadie-Lillie 2002), and how sexual addictions and compulsions may be treated. The idea of destructive sexual behaviours is most commonly applied to and studied in relation to sexual addictions, young people’s sexuality and any sexual behaviour associated with young people.

Studies that take a non-pathological and positive approach to sexuality on the internet were also found in journals from the field of culture studies, gender/feminist/ sexuality studies and media studies⁸⁵. These studies tended to be qualitative, inter-disciplinary and ethnographic.

The media studies journals carry a small but rich body of work that examines the role of media objects, spaces and technologies in facilitating internet-based sexuality. These look specifically at the role of webcams and video (Senft 2000; White 2003), of chat – ‘hot-chat’,

84 For example: Journal of Sexual Aggression, CyberPsychology & Behaviour, Journal of Deviant Behaviour, Journal of Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity, AIDS Education & Research are just a few titles that relevant articles were found in.

85 Such as Sexuality & Culture, Sexualities, International Gay and Lesbian Studies, Cultural Studies Journals, Journal of Sex Research, Archives of Sexual Behaviour as well as journals in the field of media studies, including Feminist Media Studies, International Journal of New Media Research, New Media & Society, Media, Culture & Society.

sex-chat- and language and text-based relating (Doring 2000; Alapack et al 2005), of e-groups (Munt et al 2002; Bryson 2004; Gajjala 1999). These studies, most notably by White, Alapack et al, Bryson and Gajjala, explore what it means to transact sex, intimacy and relationships through these media and internet spaces⁸⁶.

c) Popular themes

Some areas of sexuality and specific communities tended to receive more attention. Gay men and MSM⁸⁷ however are widely represented in the available literature, as opposed to queer women (Bryson 2004: 239). However, most of these deal with the offline risks for violence, STDs and HIV infection that gay men/ MSM face through making online sexual contacts. 'Barebacking' is a well-known phenomenon that receives considerable attention, a form of sexual behaviour where men seek sex with other men specifically for unprotected anal sex, an extremely high-risk form of sex (Tewksbury 2003). In the first 20 pages of a reading list on the internet and sexual activities, 50 studies had the words 'MSM/gay' 'risk' 'online' and 'HIV/STI' in them; clearly, this is an extremely popular field of research from Miami to Amsterdam to Hong Kong. In addition to actual sex practices and behaviours, these studies also examined methodological issues (on how to recruit young men for a study of barebacking; of how to assess data; how the internet can be a tool for these studies etc), and implications for HIV risk and prevention activities. Studies of heterosexual behaviours/relationships online rarely examine the same sorts of risks for women; this is a significant lapse considering that the heterosexual spread of HIV dominates the epidemiological landscape of the disease (UNFPA 2005).

Vying for a close second place in this list were studies related to youth, children, sexuality and sex education, including, paedophilia, child pornography, child protection, therapy for

⁸⁶ White, for example, in her work on web-cams, does not just explore what it means to display oneself via webcam in terms of the 'male gaze' or sexual spectatorship, but also closely explores how the object itself affects what we see; she titles her paper 'Too close to see: men, women and webcams' and examines what it means in terms of looking at a woman in images that are partial or fragmented (owing to the nature of the 'lens' and how it is transmitted), what it means to be intimate and to gaze at a sexual object in the context of technology that is literally too close to the eyes, and for women to be able to control the spectator through the sense of surveillance webcams offer (2003: 19-23)

⁸⁷ Men who have sex with men

paedophiles, the efficacy of the internet itself as a space for therapy with offenders, therapy with pornography addicts, therapy for men with 'unnatural' sexual practices and desires associated with the internet, and suchlike. Evaluations of the benefits and drawbacks of sex education online is another widely explored theme, including in locations where HIV infection rates in young people are high.

d) Women's sexuality

In terms of women's sexuality a relatively smaller number of studies looked at positive aspects of women's agency and sexuality online. The greater emphasis is on the risks women face online, from being raped online, to experiencing cyber-stalking and cyber-harassment and how existing practices like trafficking in women, mail order brides and sex tourism are enhanced through internet. There is an extremely limited focus on how women use the internet in experiencing or exploring their own sexuality online, an issue that has also been commented on by feminist writers and thinkers cited here. Studies that have looked at sexuality, women and the internet have looked at the following themes: pornography; porn sites for women; women producers of porn; cam girls; gamers; self representation and self publishing; women using the internet for sexual and non sexual relationships; activism and networking across regions on sexuality rights and women's rights issues, especially violence against women, reproductive health issues, finding support groups in relation to illnesses such as breast cancer, HIV or support groups for marginalized sexual communities; trafficking in women, trafficking in images; rape sites; 'email-order marriages', cyber-brides; cyber-stalking and online harassment.

Feminist research, in contrast to studies emerging from disciplines of psychiatry/psychology, approach these themes from more analytical and political perspectives in terms of what they mean for women's rights, for what technologies *themselves* imply rather than details of online sexual encounters or their psychological or

social 'meaning' – that is, how technology is gendered. Some academics like Bryson finds serious limitations in 'gender and technology' studies in Western literature, finding that conceptually and methodologically 'gender' is actually conflated with 'sex': studies tend to compare men's and women's uses of, access to and competencies with the internet and call that 'gender' (2004: 239). Furthermore, there are few participatory or ethnographic studies of marginalized populations of women, she says, and particularly absent are studies of queer women. Feminist perspectives of sex on the internet can be broadly classified into two streams: the victimization perspective which rejects cyber-sex for the ways in which women are under the subordination of male sexuality, and, the liberation model which sees women as being free from hetero-patriarchal norms to pursue what they desire and assume control of their sexual exploration and expression (Doring 2000: 863).

This review has shown that a rich and diverse amount of literature on the themes of sexuality and the internet exists across disciplines and to some extent (however uneven) across continents. This review also shows that some gaps and concerns exist in answering the main question raised by APC/WNSP which forms the genesis of the review, namely: In what ways do internet and ICT policy shape the sexual practices of women living in different socio-political, economic and cultural contexts?

e) Some Gaps

The review reveals how nuanced and diverse the area of 'sexuality and the internet' is beyond just the availability or search for porn. While more needs to be done on all the areas outlined above here are some additional populations/themes that have not been sufficiently explored: young women; women consumers of porn/ erotica; questions of underage sexuality and the internet especially in light of issues like access to information and services related to abortions and contraception; unwed motherhood; women's erotic pleasures not related to mainstream commercial pornography; general populations of internet users. We have also pointed out how most of the material is from the Northern perspective, especially North America and Europe. In comparison, there is far less from the global South. The

regions of study therefore will need to be picked with care, so that these imbalances may be minimally addressed.

We have seen that select sets of internet users have been targeted for research – such as gay men, sexual offenders, those in therapy for sexual addiction/ compulsivity, or adolescents/ high school and college students. These do not sufficiently reflect usage patterns of the internet in the general population and emerge from specific public health, protection or development agendas. There is also a gap in studies done with female users of the internet in particular. Some studies do undertake a gender analysis in a limited way – disaggregating their data with respect to the behavioural or demographic differences between men and women - but these do not address fundamental questions of gendered experiences of the internet.

While there has also been a considerable amount of study on ‘youth’, this has been differentially defined in various studies. Groups such as children below ten years of age, early adolescents, or ‘youth’ as in those in their late teens or early 20s have different patterns of usage and therefore classifications of ‘youth’ need to be nuanced accordingly. This is particularly significant in debates on censorship and what children/youth should be allowed or not allowed to access, and the kind of sexual content is accessed by them. Also relevant are emerging debates on the active sexualities of adolescents and people in their late teens that cannot be wished away, indicating a need for more guided and supportive content. More research into sexualities of these groups and how the internet does or can play a positive, health-seeking, responsible role is needed⁸⁸.

The studies of sexuality and the internet we review here tend to strongly emphasize the risks, violence and harm paradigms for specific populations as described above. In these versions of sexuality there appears to be a disconnect, as if there is little by way of preventive or proactive initiatives occurring offline, or that solutions must only be formed within an online space. This has ramifications for how we come to understand sexuality

⁸⁸ The definitions of ‘youth’ and ‘childhood’, ‘adolescence’ and ‘young people’ are not clear. Different international agencies (such as the WHO for example) and individual countries have classified these groups differently. There is also a considerable cultural angle to this; if for example a woman in Kenya or India may be a mother by the age of 17 years, then what are the specific needs she faces as both a teenager and a mother in the context of ICT4D programs providing sex education? How can global standards of youth safety and protection and ‘needs’ be applied then to issues of safety, harm or education when young people across the world have fundamentally different social and cultural experiences even while they are all accessing ICTs?

online; not only does this further certain agendas, but it simultaneously obscures other sexual realities. Young women and their sexuality, women's consumption of pornography/erotica in global contexts, queer people's organizing, production and consumption of pleasure online, these are all tellingly absent from the literature, in comparison to the volumes of quantitative studies on pornography addicts and the harm to young people. Ideas of pleasure, self-expression, creativity, autonomy in sexuality are bound to seem absent if they do not become the focus of research and writing. Rye & Meaney (2007) and Hyde & DeLamater (2003) find that when sexual pleasure is made the focus, it substantially alters the discourse of sexuality, placing emphasis on that which is positive and uplifting rather than on that which is limiting and violent. However there is some need for caution before unambiguously believing that the internet has 'liberated' sexuality. An area that deserves more attention perhaps is ethnographic research with users and analyses of web spaces that examine if and how the internet has allowed for alternate configurations and expressions of sexuality, and to what extent.

f) Methodological Issues

Methodologies used to study the internet include: quantitative online- questionnaire-based, especially in the field of psychology (Cooper, Daneback et al 2005, Ross et al, Hong et al 2007); within media studies, content analysis of websites, chat transcripts or participant observation and interviews; within feminist media studies and gender studies in particular though, discourse analysis influenced by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault finds a special place as well as textual and visual analysis of sites/spaces which have been the main form of studying the internet (Schauer 2005, Day and Keys 2008, Brubaker and Johnson 2008). In some instances of feminist studies on 'black grrls' and cam girls qualitative studies have been done with more in depth interviews that give subjects the opportunity to share and reflect on these themes. It is notable that only in these qualitative studies is the voice of the women/girls most distinct and audible.

In quantitative data, gender disaggregated data (while definitely shedding light on broader trends) remains superficial and does not bring out the experiences, thoughts or issues of women themselves. Discourse analysis has also been relevant to the feminist project by giving special direction on what micro texts or conversations online mean in the macro

context, and assessing whether these are favourable or unfavourable, counter or advance the wider objectives of feminism. Also favourable have been historical-cultural studies approaches that examine the wider context in which things become 'indecent', 'pornographic' or objectionable (Atwood, 2004). These have special relevance to the themes of sexuality, internet and women because the intersection of the three (or indeed even each theme in itself) cannot be adequately examined outside the context it is in. This is relevant in the very different regional concerns which emerge from this review. Clearly the interactions of the internet with women and sexuality are very different in the USA as compared to Brazil or China or Africa.

Also worthwhile exploring is the 'reception studies' approach (McCreadie-Lillie, 2002) that looks at the ways in which (porn) internet use is being received, especially in the context of non Western countries where the internet is not necessarily accessed in the privacy of one's home, but in cyber-cafes or offices, public places which will obviously have a different impact on how sexual practices and the internet intersect, especially for women. How empowering is it for women in particular then, to access the privacy and anonymity of the internet in a public location, particularly if the privacy of the home is a heavily monitored zone? What sorts of spaces does this allow them to access or not?

Other methodological questions are: Should the actual research be done through the net or in person or a mix of both? Are these two sets of data comparable? This has been an area in which academics have commented on at length. Ross (2005) compared a conventional 'gold standard' random sample to an internet sample with the same questions, and found there was no significant difference in the responses given by them, except some minor deviations. Yu and Yu (2007) also come to a similar conclusion. They study the responses of computer literate teachers in Taiwan to both net-administered questionnaires as well as paper questionnaires, and find that the internet questionnaire is a promising alternative to the paper questionnaire. They also detail the advantages of doing research on the internet: large heterogeneous samples are accessible from which powerful statistical inferences can be made; anonymity offered by the net means that specific samples 'with rare characteristics' (like sexual minorities, transgender, sex workers and so on) can be recruited; and there are significant savings on time and cost.

Feminist studies done via the internet also say that there is not much difference between online and face to face interactions interviews and discussions (Kendall, 2002; Constable,

2003; Schaeffer-Grabel, 2005). Scholars have questioned the validity of face to face interviews also, pointing out how sometimes respondents say what researchers want to hear or give exaggerated and false statements (Scott, 1999).

In fact, 'virtual ethnography' appears to be an emerging method of choice to explore the reflective and more personal voices of women. In a unique qualitative study 'Charlotte's Web' in which Stephen Biggs conducts a virtual ethnography through chat and emails with the single respondent he calls 'Charlotte', Biggs (2000) notes that except that ICQ chat interviews took more time (three times longer) there was little difference between this and face to face interviews he had done previously. He says, there is "something very rich about textual communication – not more or less, but different than verbal communication". This might be linked to the respondent Charlotte's own reflection that in real life, she feels she is acting out fake selves, while on the internet she is 'herself' thereby her responses through this medium are somehow 'truer'. Studies based on readings of women's diaries/ journals (Addlakha, 2005) reveal that reflective writing by women can be a revealing and effective way to understand issues on which there has been silence, which may be interpolated to the case of reflective writing and interactions online. Nicole Constable (2003) also vouches for the "rich ethnographic potential of virtual ethnography".

While it seems that qualitative studies, especially ethnographies, and the use of discourse analysis, historical-cultural approaches and reception studies are a promising methodology to look at the convergence of women, sexuality and the internet in different contexts, it may be important to set the methodology against the desired aim of the research project. It may be useful to assess which kind of research methodology will lead to policy changes. For example, there is a tendency to assume that it is quantitative research that will have greater policy impact given its 'validity' because of volume. But in this review, we did not come across any substantive quantitative study that indicated a wide prevalence of sexual predation of children through the internet. Only some case studies and media coverage appear to have been behind the proactive measures on the part of governments to undertake initiatives to combat internet paedophilia. So perhaps some indications from the policy review will help in checking what have been the policy implications of large quantitative studies before dismissing the method entirely.

The dynamic nature of the internet means that it is difficult to track at any point of time the content on the net as it is constantly changing, websites are put up and taken off, chat

rooms gather and disperse, and so on. This adds other methodological problems when studying online content. The inability to go back to websites, or find the same people in the same chat rooms or spaces mean that conventional understandings of the 'field' in such a case have to be dispensed with. Academics have struggled with these issues by keeping 'grabs' of websites they have studied to validate that indeed such a site did exist. Some methodological problems may also arise because of cultural contexts and specificities, for example, will women from the Arab world, even those who are online, discuss issues around their sexuality? How much will English as the dominant language affect the study? Will face to face interviews in local languages be possible to offset this? How will definitions be interpreted across contexts, for example, sexuality rights are an established idea in some regions but in other regions homosexuality is illegal or criminalized, and how will this affect respondents' openness?

2. A Conceptual Framework for Future Research

The conceptual framework for the proposed research should be created keeping in mind the following theoretical perspectives and conceptual developments drawn from the review so as to fill some of the gaps observed in existing research, and to enable the research to be more representative, nuanced and meaningful.

a) A Political- Economy Perspective and the Context of Globalization

There is a need for a political-economy analysis that recognizes how the use of the internet plays out differently in different political/economic/social/religious contexts. Accordingly, women experience, access and use the internet differently in technologically advanced regions and those that are less so.

There are some important ways in which the divides between the North and South are implicated in this review. Women in the South are essentially approached and understood in terms of their labour and their productive value, be it as software engineers, as back-end call-centre employees, as mail order brides, as subjects of pornography, as 'target groups'

to participate in development projects, and so on. As a corollary, women from the North are 'consumers'. This sort of categorization into binaries makes it difficult to re-focus the lens on how exactly women engage with the internet in other roles or how it enables or disables them from enjoying their sexual and communication rights.

Also critical is to set the research against the times we live in – the context of globalization and the effect this has had on societies, roles, networks, people's lives, their work, aspirations, opportunities and the overall contour of the world today. The pertinent issues raised by Constable (2003) and Schaeffer-Grabel (2005) of seeing sex tourism and mail-order brides in terms of globalization, global mobility, as a feature of the transnational flow of goods and services, are much like seeing prostitution in terms of 'work' and not as 'violence'. Just as advertising prostitution on the internet gives Thai sex workers a sense of 'status' so too does it mean something similar, possibly, to access work and 'the whole world', for a woman who is able to emigrate to a Western country as a wife, and for a South Indian software engineer migrating to Silicon Valley (N Veena 2007). Being global, escaping a relative sense of poverty, 'living in the West' are all too-real aspirations for people from the global South, which need to inflect these discussions beyond the binaryisms.

Finally, the role of the market needs to be kept in mind. The economic models that have fuelled the growth of the internet in a certain way are merely an extension of the political-economic structures that exist offline. The sense that practically anything can be fashioned into a consumer product is not new. Even homosexuality that a mere forty years ago was made legal in the UK is now something that can be widely marketed. LGBT activists have rued the 'commoditization of identity' (Gamson 2003, O'Riordan 2005) worrying that LGBT realities have become 'lifestyles' to be marketed within the corporate media industry, with implications for activism, rights and organizing elsewhere in the world where the same issues are positioned as 'development'. Similarly, in the context of women, Naomi Klein has shown how feminist ideals can be effectively be used to sell running shoes for women as Nike has successfully done (2000). In the present economic climate when there may be changes in how consumer culture online is re-configured, what does this mean for women who have their own home-pages and blogs, for example? How will women's spaces online, particularly in the North, become new virtual marketplaces? What will the impact be for

women's blogs, particularly in the South, that are now used to sell products that may not always be good for women, or for feminist politics?

b) ICT4D and Sexuality

While an ICT4D perspective will be crucial in addressing the inequities in access to ICTs, and the centrality of communication rights to the process and outcome of development, it is important in this research to have an understanding of development that integrates sexuality and sexuality rights.

When new technologies are introduced in a region, there needs to be some conceptual understanding of how they will become a part of women's (people's) everyday lives, or what the politics framing this are. For example, in introducing ICTs for development is there a greater push for open source software for example, or is Microsoft merely finding a new market? Will new users have to become familiar with English, or a Northern notion of 'time', or 'work', or 'efficiency'? Critically for women's enjoyment of sexuality and communication rights in the context of ICTs, how can development and sexuality meet? Is sexuality a public health problem to be contained or a basic emotional and bodily right to be enjoyed? Could an ICT for development program with women focus on how they may use the internet or some other technologies to showcase their holistic experiences of pleasure/body/intimacy rather than to only address the limitations or violence they face? Recent and ongoing work by Cornwall and Jolly (2006) makes this point quite forcefully and with useful examples.

c) A More Nuanced Feminist Perspective

Without a doubt, feminist studies have brought out women-centred and women's rights approaches to technology, leading us to believe that a feminist perspective is indeed critical to the proposed research. However, a more nuanced approach is required given that feminist studies so far have also tended to focus on risks and the assumption of danger/violence. Some of the more recent feminist studies cited here on women and technology suggest we move away from over-emphasising women's problems/fear of

technologies, or making essentialist assumptions about ‘feminine’ usage of the internet (Lee 2006). Perhaps a more balanced approach is required, between danger/violence – a critical issues to women’s experience of the internet – and empowerment, a lesser discussed but equally important aspect of women’s use of technologies. Especially given that with Web 2.0, blogging, social networking sites and greater levels of interactivity are possible, the tendency to slide into the perils paradigm has to be balanced against the beneficial aspects of the internet.

Locating oneself in feminist research then, one cannot escape references to debates on representation of female sexuality in the media. It is perhaps one of the greyest conceptual areas that arise in discussions of the internet, but one where nuances are critical. The review has shown that there need to be clauses, caveats, restrictions and disclaimers in discussing women, sexuality and representation. The McKinnon-Dworkin stand on pornography has now come to be considered *the* feminist perception of sexuality and objectification; however more recently there are spaces emerging for a more ground-up approach that locates itself in the lived experience of women (Atwood 2004). The idea made popular by them has implications for how women’s sexuality is itself constructed. Moreover existing digital divides continue to play a role in who gets to represent themselves, and who does not. Pornography / self representation cannot be seen in isolation either; just as there is a ‘mainstreaming’ of pornographic images through advertising and consumer culture, there are also perspectives from visual and cultural studies that allow us to read texts in many different ways, and these do not have to be apolitical (Atwood 2004). While the violence and degradation available in some forms of pornography are all too real for some women, there are others who are attempting to fashion their own sense of sexuality and self expression through their bodies. It would perhaps be more useful to arrive at analyses that originate from the women’s lived experiences themselves, rather than from a top-down approach that decides that *all* images of women are violent objectifications.

d) A Rights Framework beyond ‘Protection-from-Harm’

A positive and broader concept of sexuality rights does not really penetrate the reviewed research studies; instead we find that ‘sexuality rights’ has been largely limited to a ‘protection-from-harm’ paradigm. Again, harm itself has been sometimes problematically and subjectively defined, which needs to be questioned. The interpretation of harm by protective agendas has in fact served to limit or censure the rights of people to freely express their notions of pleasure and fantasy. Moreover the role of the media needs to be questioned to understand why there is an emphasis on certain aspects of sexuality in the

context of the internet than others⁸⁹. For example, while there may be a great deal invested in online policing of child pornography, it is still an agenda that emerges specifically from North America and Western Europe. The investment in safety for women – worldwide – online does not receive as much attention.

The construction of harm in a very specific way also obscures the possibility of wider definitions, and becomes important specifically for feminist researchers: are pro-eating disorder websites harmful, or can they just be ignored as a ‘cultural’ issue in a context where there are specific ideas of body image for women? What about spam that contains endless advertisements for penile enhancement drugs and surgery? Could that be considered invasive to women?

The terms of discussion on harm need to be pegged around a rights discourse which puts at the centre issues of freedom of expression, communication rights along with people's rights to pursue and enjoy the full scope of their sexuality, as defined by the World Health Organization and integrated into various international human rights instruments. At the same time, it needs to foreground areas of conflict where rights of one group have been in tension with rights of others. For example, the right to privacy has been an area of debate, especially between communication rights activists and those working on women's rights. The issue of privacy – from data tracking by corporations and governments – is an important one to internet rights groups, who maintain that individuals' right to privacy is vital. But feminist groups have had a more cautious response to this, aware that 'privacy' has been a double-edged sword. Women's rights have historically been violated in the shade of 'privacy', for example in situations of domestic violence. The position is that privacy is only a screen to hide violence against women (Hughes, cited in Maltzahn 2006). Radical feminists have opined often that measures to address violence against women are sometimes rejected on the grounds that they impinge on (male) civil liberties, and that such objections usually have men at the centre of its considerations⁹⁰. Similarly, measures to block rape sites or other such problematic speech on the internet are met with opposition from free speech activists, often resulting in an uncomfortable deadlock, and the danger of women's rights being used as a pawn by right-wing forces to further their own agendas. The breaches of individual privacy for ‘public good’ (such as sting operations) are also a

89 Fulda (2002) also highlights the role of media in accelerating responses to cases of internet pedophilia and bringing it to the fore, especially the appeal of breaking stories in the league of ‘educated man in business suit living in posh area turns out to be internet stalker’. Sonia Bathla (in Bose, 2006) probes the consensus between media and Indian culture that keeps actual issues of women's problems (such as domestic violence or rape) out of the mainstream newspapers, reminding us that a free press in itself does not guarantee representation of concerns of marginalized groups. The media does not always represent the voice of women.

90 Donna Hughes also rues how Internet libertarianism and US free speech absolutism is setting the standard for internet communication and that such ‘unbridled libertarianism’ may come at the cost of women's rights.

controversial issue. Such nuances within the rights framework also need to be foregrounded and engaged with in future research.

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