

Women's human rights: violence against women, pornography and ICTs

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What are the connections between violence against women (VAW) and information communication technologies (ICTs), particularly digital communications technologies? To answer this question, we need to recognise that ICTs impact on several things. Namely:

1. they are a range of technological tools used to communicate, exchange, express, disseminate, create and transform information;
2. they create spaces where individuals interact, whether physically or through text and other forms of representation;
3. they are part of a discourse, i.e. the discourse of technology and information society, where subjects are constructed, and socially relevant axes of identities are reified, performed and destabilised.

Therefore, ICTs are intrinsically about power relations, and the construction or subversion of these relations.

Violence against women on the other hand, are about the systemic and systematic utilisation of violence as a method to exert and demonstrate control. The target of such violence are women, and they can encompass “acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty” (CEDAW/GR/19/6).

As such, when unravelling the issue of VAW in ICTs, power relations existing between genders become acutely surfaced. To interrogate the negotiations of power that happen within these spaces, the recent debate on the issue of pornography within the context of internet governance will be used as a site of examination.

Some background: on 17 June 2005, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, approved .xxx as a global top level domain for sexually explicit materials in the internet after 5 years of negotiation. This decision received murmurs of protest from several governments, particularly from Brazil and more audibly and recently, from the United States. As a result of two letters, one from the Chair of the Government Advisory Committee (GAC) to ICANN, and another from Michael D. Gallagher, the Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information at the U.S. Commerce Department, ICANN announced that they will defer the decision related to .xxx until September 15th this year.

Particularly prominent within the discussion of .xxx is the muted response from women's movements about an issue that relates directly to much of our work concerning the commodification of women's bodies and sexualities. Following the discussion raised at the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Governance list about this matter, the question of pornography as a possible issue related to violence against women was skirted around with a summary dismissal; namely, that with or without .xxx, pornography exists and will continue to exist and flourish on the internet. The concern instead, centred around the issue of undue government intervention and influence on a supposedly independent body which governs the internet's logical infrastructure.

So, how is it possible that the very real and material consequences of creating a specialised space for the marketing of (predominantly) women's sexuality become so easily deflected into one of lesser concern than the 'larger' political issue of internet governance?

Firstly, this is because of the close relationship that debates about pornography have with questions of State censorship and regulation. Even feminist movements are deeply cleaved over the issue; some arguing for outright censorship by seeing a direct causal link between violence against women and main/malestream pornography, whilst others have a more problematised relationship to the issue by demanding spaces for diverse expressions of sexualities. Personally, I believe that censorship is not a solution, particularly in the context of the internet where publishing of alternative and subversive forms of sexualities are rendered more possible through the relatively low cost of production and dissemination. Further, pornography – linked with morality – is often used by governments as a justifying rhetoric to control and restrict freedom of expression and information without deeper engagement with the issue. This means that the policing and control of women's sexuality once again, become another method to control civil society in general through the assumption of patriarchal protectionism.

The second challenge in articulating a vocal response on the .xxx issue is that in many respects, ICTs is a privileged discourse to enter into. The existence of a 'digital divide' in terms of infrastructure, accessibility, control of content and technological development translates to unequal ability to benefit from ICT developments between people who are positioned at different locations, and with divergent and multiple identities. In a practical sense, to even begin by internet connectivity means investing a significant amount of money and time to acquire necessary apparatuses and skills to engage in this technology. This means that most women who make up the world's poorest population have very little direct stake to even begin imagining the necessity of taking on this issue. Likewise, with limited resources, women's movements,

particularly in the developing countries and/or the economic 'South', may understand the potential and importance of emerging ICTs, but may be unable to place this matter as a priority in our work.

Nonetheless, there is an urgent need for women's rights activists and advocates to claim a material stake in the arena of ICTs or risk being spoken about, and for, by our well-meaning but less-invested allies in civil society movements, or the State. Whether we are located in positions that enables direct access to digital communications technology or not, the impact of ICTs in shaping our sense of spatial, temporal and social relations with each other is undeniable. Technology mediated communications inform us of cultural messages that are loaded with gendered, raced, and other discourses. These affect how we conceptually make sense of our place in the world, and the context we are in, including how those of us who are 'connected' relate to those who are not. Access to information and spaces to create and communicate knowledge in turn affects access to positions of privilege that enable further control over resources and decision-making.

As mentioned earlier, ICTs are part of a discourse where subjects are constructed, and socially relevant axes of identities are reified, performed and destabilised. Returning to .xxx as a domain that arguably recognises and simultaneously legitimises the presence of pornography in digital spaces, what kinds of interactions and subjects are being created through this exchange? Left as it is, with minimal intervention from women's movements and the structural dominance of masculinist discourse in both the fields of technology and sexually explicit content, our de-prioritisation of this issue is augmenting unequal gender relations and the discursive construction of subjects based on highly contentious sexist, racist and related paradigms.

It is without question that the dominant mass of pornography currently available through digital technologies are discriminatory towards women. Produced largely for the heterosexual male audience, images of women are shuttled across digital spaces as passive objects with minimal sexual agency. Racist, post-colonial and orientalist discourses intersect within these images, and are disseminated with great speed across national boundaries to construct and amplify deeply problematic gendered, raced and sexual relations. Further, the development of ICTs has several significant consequences. It makes everyone a potential producer of pornography, enlarges the network of distribution to very private spaces that civil society has historically struggled to protect against unwarranted State intrusion (like the laptop in my room at 4am), makes it harder to track syndicates and creates spaces for VAW perpetrators to network and communicate.

The question is, how do gender, women's rights, human rights and communication rights advocates intervene within this debate? When we are calling for freedom of expression and information, who is it for, when does the freedom turn into harm, and who often gets ignored or unheard in the decision-making processes? How can women's rights activists and advocates engage in this issue without representing women who engage in the sex industry as victims without agency, whilst resisting the narrowing of spaces for expression through State censorship, or being treated as a footnote? Is there in fact, a need to develop a specific women's human rights framework in relation to ICTs?

Arguably not. The challenges in engaging with emerging ICTs are similar to problems that women face in all other fields. It relates to limited access into decision-making positions, development that historically marginalises women's perspectives, concerns and experiences, creation of a subject-specific language that reflects this exclusion, domination by economically powerful subjects and nations, as well as the construction of women as subjects that have limited creative capacity either as low-level producers, consumers or commodities. There is a need to shift the understanding of ICTs from a ghettoised area relevant only to those who are privileged enough to have technological access, to the larger framework of women's human rights, which includes violence against women.

One significant point of enabling this shift is to perceive ICTs as **much more than a potential tool** for activism, but as **an integral part of the issue** itself. In other words, how do emerging ICTs and discourse surrounding it perpetuate unequal power relations in multiple arenas? In terms of pornography on the internet, how do they fit into the larger framework of sexualised representations of women in general? From the soap advertisement to hardcore xxx, they inflect the paradigm of women's objectification at different but reverberating levels.

How then, can we use existing mechanisms, such as General Recommendation 19 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), or Section J in the Beijing Platform for Action, to demand for the protection of women's fundamental human rights in the field of ICTs and information societies?

To begin in this process, there is a need for us to unravel the obfuscating language that surrounds this field. The highly technical frameworks that current discussions around information societies in relation to ICTs are operating within need to be dismantled and exposed for the neglect that they have demonstrated towards women's lives. When xxx is argued as an issue of undue influence between different governments on a global internet governance, women's rights activists have to clearly

and loudly say that the issue really is, what impact this would have on actual women's bodies. Decisions about governance or financing in an increasingly significant digital space cannot be made without interventions that reflect women's diverse and lived experiences, concerns and priorities. We have to demand for our right to freely move, create knowledge and represent our diversities, communicate and form networks with each other, and be safe from harm. To do so, we need to play an active and deeply invested role in the development of this space, so that instead of the amplification of inequalities, it can result in truly transformative social relations.

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