

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

**WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity  
and justice for our digital future**



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC),  
IT FOR CHANGE, WACC GLOBAL  
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

## Global Information Society Watch 2024 SPECIAL EDITION

WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future

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# Preliminary feminist provocations on internet governance and WSIS+20

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For this intervention I have chosen to speak to a few feminists, activists and scholars<sup>1</sup> that engage with internet governance at the national, regional or global level. This is not a comprehensive mapping of the field of those engaging with internet governance from feminist and/or queer political perspectives, though it does point to the value of such a mapping. These were broad and unstructured conversations and interviews around their experiences of internet governance processes so far. How open have they been? How relevant? How effective? How inclusive? What are the feminist priorities? What are the questions that still remain? While many of the conversations focused on the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the observations have clear implications for WSIS+20, or any other process where a multistakeholder approach to internet governance is promised.

## When did the internet grow up?

In the 20 years since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), one thing that has changed dramatically is the internet itself. In an interview with Jac sm Kee, an activist who set up the Numun Fund as the first dedicated fund for feminist tech,<sup>2</sup> she pointed out that in 2003 and 2005, when the first meetings of WSIS took place, “the internet was a grey, still-yet-forming nebulous space.” Jia Tolentino’s book on the internet is one of those records of how the internet radically changed and also has changed us over the last two decades. “In 1999, it felt different to spend all day on the internet,” she writes. “This was the You’ve Got Mail

era, when it seemed that the very worst thing that could happen online was that you might fall in love with your business rival.”<sup>3</sup> This may not be entirely true, because attempts at control and censorship online as well as accounts of assault are coeval with what we came to know as the internet from the mid-1990s. But what is true is that by 2006, just a year after the second WSIS meeting in Tunis, there were several digital rights and women’s rights groups already having to campaign and work towards policy change that took into account violence and hate speech against women and other groups online.<sup>4</sup>

However, there was a rosy promise of the internet that spread from development to education, from entertainment to the democratisation of information and news, from the digitalisation of governments to the coordination of movements and protests. This was also perhaps what made it possible to imagine that the internet, as Jac says, “could potentially be governed by a different kind of mechanism that allowed for the relative flattening of institutions and stakeholders, and that it could be a mechanism that would make participation in governance accessible.” What is obvious, though, is that the internet is a different beast today, though the need for open, transparent, accessible frameworks of governance and “new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation among governments and other stakeholders, i.e. the private sector, civil society and international organizations”<sup>5</sup> remains.

## Alice’s tea party:<sup>6</sup> Multistakeholderism

A recurring theme in the conversations I had was exhaustion but also a sense of faith in the idea of multistakeholderism. There are those of us who are

1 Conversations with Wala Mohammad, Chenai Chair, Dhyta Caturani, Shubha Kayastha, Jac sm Kee, Ruhya Seward and Mariana Fossatti. Thank you for participating. Additional input was received from Karla Velasco, Erika Smith and Hija Kamran from the APC Women’s Rights Programme.

2 <https://numun.fund>

3 Tolentino, J. (2020). *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. Random House.

4 <https://www.takebackthetech.net>

5 International Telecommunication Union. (2005). *WSIS Outcome Documents*. <https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/outcome/booklet.pdf>

6 Sontag, S. (1994). *Alice in Bed: A play in eight scenes*. Vintage.

tired of the charade of inclusion and being brought to the table to not be heard, or to be misheard. But what is the other option – to not be heard at all?

Dhyta Caturani – an activist from Indonesia – points out that “for small collectives, the IGF was not accessible... It was very rare to have a woman/LGBTQIA+ or minority to speak about their interests on a general issue at the IGF,” she said, adding that it is important to have our perspectives on a wide range of issues heard, like artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, etc.

The objective of participating in WSIS for many civil society organisations was to ensure that international human rights standards were integrated into internet governance in an inclusive way. As stated in the APC input to the most recent IGF held in Kyoto:

The IGF and its associated regional and national forums as well as the intersessional mechanisms (the IGF ecosystem as a whole) has consistently been a space for enabling public participation and learning, monitoring of progress in achieving inclusive, human-rights based, people-centred internet and digital governance, and discussing the positive and negative impacts of the internet and internet policies in a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder setting. The IGF nurtures thinking and practice around the WSIS action lines, including policy responses. The IGF dynamic coalitions on community connectivity and net neutrality, along with the best practice forums on gender and access and on local content, have continued to make significant progress in identifying innovative approaches and practices to help move forward in enabling complementary models of connectivity that address digital exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

But it is not just civil society and international organisations that must be included in multistakeholder discussions and processes. Inclusion means the participation of communities and people who are most affected and vulnerable on account of gender, race, sexuality, caste, their location in cities or rural and remote areas, and Indigenous groups, among others. This is also the missing piece in the recently released zero draft of the Global Digital Compact (GDC),<sup>8</sup>

that nevertheless reiterates the commitment to multistakeholderism.<sup>9</sup> The necessity of ensuring access for vulnerable communities and of creating openness in internet processes is that, unlike in 2003 and 2005, internet and data governance now impact everyone regardless of what level of access they themselves are at.

The fantasy of being brought to the table to participate equally attempts to flatten the power differential and dynamics at play between technology companies, civil society and international organisations, governments, academics, and other communities. But over the years, the IGF has shown that the needle on the inclusion of women and gender-diverse people has not shifted enough. This is evident from the annual Gender Report Card on the IGF,<sup>10</sup> and also the fact that many actors are dropping out of the space. Chenai Chair, who works on movement building for trustworthy AI, says:

The IGF may be perceived as a “failed space” or a “talk shop” given that there are no policy outcomes and the locations of events have come with concerns of upholding democratic open space. In addition, technology companies and organisations have preferred to go directly to lobbying and legal interventions in the European Union or United States for more effective mechanisms to bring about change.

Nonetheless significant possibilities were opened up because of IGFs, like the visibility of feminists and groups from the global South leading on online gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment, but also on myriad panels, including on digital taxation, access, privacy, etc. DNS Research Foundation mapping found that, among other things, the IGF helped in consolidating a global ecosystem of knowledge sharing.<sup>11</sup> Jac suggests that online and technology-facilitated GBV as an issue is particularly important in the context of internet

<sup>7</sup> See the comments by APC Internet Governance Lead Valeria Betancourt in the section on “Overarching Issues” here: <https://intgovforum.org/en/content/kyoto-messages>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dig.watch/resource/global-digital-compact-zero-draft>

<sup>9</sup> The Geneva Declaration of Principles 2003 does do a better job at inclusion. Aside from explicit mention of gender, poverty, Indigenous people, rights of children, etc., the 13th principle states: “In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and underprivileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.”

<sup>10</sup> Gender Report Card on the IGF. See: <https://genderit.org/tags/gender-report-card> and [https://www.intgovforum.org/system/files/filedepot/49/igf\\_2019\\_gender\\_report\\_cards\\_overview.pdf](https://www.intgovforum.org/system/files/filedepot/49/igf_2019_gender_report_cards_overview.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Caeiro, C., et al. (2024). *Net Effects: An evidence-led exploration of IGF impact*. DNS Research Federation. <https://dnsrf.org/blog/net-effects--an-evidence-led-exploration-of-igf-impact/index.html>

governance because “it allowed local organisations, especially feminist ones, to enter these spaces.” Shubha Kayastha, who works on digital security and related issues in Nepal, says that their first exposure to feminism in relation to digital rights was at a regional IGF and at a pre-conference on feminism and digital rights organised by APC. Almost everyone I spoke to recalls moments of meeting other feminists or queer people at the IGFs as moments of recognition and solidarity. The expansion of our networks of solidarity across borders has been one of the concrete benefits of the IGF.

Shubha, however, adds a caveat that the experience of being involved at the level of the national IGF in Nepal was disheartening in spite of closer involvement, because it was made to look more participative and inclusive than it was, and often this extended to a kind of tokenism, especially in relation to gender. Organisations, big and small, grapple with how the processes around internet governance might change with the introduction of the GDC and high-level advisory boards (on AI and other issues) that only involve government officials and multilateral partnerships. Mariana Fossatti, who works with Whose Knowledge?,<sup>12</sup> says: “From this corner of the world, I feel overwhelmed.” There is an increasing disarray in the spaces and institutions to go to when there is harm or rights are violated. Is it the IETF, UN, IGF, EU? How do we ensure safeguards and accountability?

### Feminist thematic priorities

There are of course thematic priorities that will remain hugely relevant regardless of how governance takes place or how we are (or are not) included, and these include the following:

*Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)* is an important thematic priority for women’s rights, gender and sexuality organisations, and increasingly so as disinformation and violence online impact those who are already marginalised, and also those who are journalists, activists, or simply outspoken and public. Wala Mohammad, who works with the Hopes and Actions Foundation<sup>13</sup> and has done research in Sudan, says that disinformation often forms public opinion, and that the prevalence of hate speech and trolling has a major impact on communities and in relation to how they are perceived by those with

power. Gendered disinformation, including virulent homophobia, often plays a role in national politics and elections<sup>14</sup> and also in a dehumanisation that paves the way for genocide and atrocities.<sup>15</sup> Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality and sexual expression, caste, religion, political views and other factors all play a role in violence online faced by women and gender-diverse people.

TFGBV has been a vehicle for the participation of local organisations and feminist collectives in conversations around violence and safety online, privacy, data governance, anonymity, encryption, political expression, sexuality and sexual expression, movements online, and so on. But Chenai warns against the co-optation of feminist perspectives and issues, including TFGBV, without a clear understanding of the complexities. It is undeniably an imperative to address this violence so that the foundations of the internet are not discriminatory or do not exclude women or those who are marginal and vulnerable; though the question remains as to whether we are too late for that. “Technology companies want to be the first actor, but what is imperative for them is their business model, and this costs great harm to those who face discrimination,” says Jac.

*Meaningful access and connectivity* are also key themes, and bridging the gender digital divide is a main priority. Mariana, whose work with Whose Knowledge? is about decolonising the internet, says that concerns around access to the internet and information/knowledge need to be framed with reference to current realities and take into account barriers such as local languages, the hegemony of English, and the continuing challenges of connectivity. She adds: “There have been more subtle changes that affect how we can or can’t relate to each other. How the algorithms are shadow banning our messages – how AI is shaping communication is subtle.”

Ruhiya Seward, a feminist working with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), also believes meaningful access and connectivity are important; that access should be secure and

<sup>12</sup> <https://whoseknowledge.org>

<sup>13</sup> <https://hopesandactions.org>

<sup>14</sup> Sívori, H., & Mochel, L. (2021). *Brazilian feminist responses to online hate speech: Seeing online violence through an intersectional lens*. Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM). <https://firn.genderit.org/research/brazilian-feminist-responses-online-hate-speech-seeing-online-violence-through>

<sup>15</sup> Kamran, H. (2024, 3 April). “This is a Zionist model”: Atrocities propaganda is another weapon in Israel’s genocide kit against Palestine. *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/zionist-model-atrocities-propaganda-another-weapon-israels-genocide-kit-against>



private and is more than merely access to a device. While recognising the many problems with content online, “for many of us the internet is about finding things, information,” she noted, adding, “I use it a lot for research. I love the internet.” She returns to the Feminist Principles of the Internet<sup>16</sup> as a framework that sets out consistent feminist priorities. Access is also about participating in the digital economy, and Wala emphasises the need to look at access in relation to how the ongoing war in Sudan and restrictions on access to technologies meant people were excluded from economic opportunities, including digital labour platforms that were not allowed.

*Data governance and privacy* continue to be priorities for feminist collectives, but so are emerging issues around *AI governance*. As pointed out by Nishant Shah, “somewhere in the last few years, without us even realising it, and in an almost non-dramatic fashion, we have foundationally changed our idea of who we are as information subjects.” The human being has become “‘rehumanized’, ‘parsed’, ‘processed’, and presented only through interfaces that render it recognizable.”<sup>17</sup> From a feminist perspective, what is troubling is the possible growing reliance on AI when the problem of inherent biases in systems built using AI is not yet addressed – and yet AI is part of content moderation, facial recognition and surveillance, and so on.

What is absolutely essential is that our *movements, organisations, collectives, activists and researchers* build networks and the internal strength and ability to address the challenges now. Jac says:

Our movement lacks capacity and ability to address the multiple forums and spaces in which the threads of internet governance need to be followed. Building this movement and the comprehension of the importance of digital technology and the internet to different movements (but also how and why it is important) is a feminist priority.

Often it seems that this disarray of forums is almost deliberate, as our energies get scattered and redirected.

## Conclusion

Most people I spoke to suggest a fatigue and impossibility of negotiating within governance spaces. Ruhiya pointed to how it took two decades of work to get online GBV noticed globally and to begin to effect policy and language change. “We are still in the middle of those changes,” she says. “Time will tell if we have been successful.” This perhaps was the most hopeful note struck in all the conversations I had.

Before we move forward, we need to take stock of our experiences so far; what needs to be parsed through is power and visibility. Given that the inclusion of women and LGBTQIA+ people marginalised on account of their sexuality has been inadequate, what still needs to be addressed is how we were and will be included, where we are seated, when we are given a voice, and whether it is merely tokenism or an actual accounting of our experience. Beyond visibility, it is about our true volubility.

<sup>16</sup> <https://feministinternet.org>

<sup>17</sup> Shah, N., Rajadhyaksha, A., Hasan, N. A., & Arun, C. (2022). *Overload, Creep, Excess – An Internet from India*. Institute of Network Cultures. <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/overload-creep-excess-an-internet-from-india>

## WSIS+20: REIMAGINING HORIZONS OF DIGNITY, EQUITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a “common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society.”

This special edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) considers the importance of WSIS as an inclusive policy and governance mechanism, and what, from a civil society perspective, needs to change for it to meet the challenges of today and to meaningfully shape our digital future.

Expert reports consider issues such as the importance of the historical legacy of WSIS, the failing multistakeholder system and how it can be revived, financing mechanisms for local access, the digital inequality paradox, why a digital justice framing matters in the context of mass digitalisation, and feminist priorities in internet governance. While this edition of GISWatch asks: “How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?” it carries lessons for other digital governance processes such as the Global Digital Compact and NETmundial+10.

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