

Reflections on the Seminar – I

–Gita Sen

I would like to begin my comments by stating that these are disparate and somewhat disjointed remarks reflecting on a number of the issues that have come up during the two days of this conference. I want to start by putting in a caveat about the women's movement since an important issue in the context of this seminar is about the place and role of women's movements in the information society. We know there is much discussion about who is and is not part of the women's movement, what it consists of, whether it is one or multiple movements, and so on. Nonetheless I am not going to engage here with these questions. I am simply going to keep talking about 'the' women's movement, assuming that you have a sense of the amorphous 'something' or 'some things' that I am talking about. The women's movement is a part of the larger space in which we struggle to transform our world, and those who inhabit this space have certain characteristics that are important for us to recognize as we try to move forward in this discussion.

We, in the women's movement, tend to have fairly strong Luddite tendencies. On the one hand, we don't like technology or the idea of technology. This is odd because, in our personal and collective lives, we actually like technology a fair amount and we use it all the time and quite effectively! But often we don't like the concept, the idea of technology. In that sense, we have a very old, Luddite notion of technology that is filled with deep suspicion of what it might and might not do. This may be quite reasonable given the ambiguities of what technology has been and has meant for women through history. But it certainly colours our inherent approach and it colours what one might call our 'default position'.

Having said this, I want to argue that we need to recognize that we are living through a new industrial revolution and it is really about the nature and implications of that revolution that we are arguing, due to which we have as much ambivalence and confusion about technology as we do today. This is not just simply technological change, with a small 't', as has been said a million times in the last two days of the seminar. It is something that touches upon so many different aspects that we do not quite know how each of these pieces of the larger puzzle of the new industrial revolution fit together.

In this context I want to plant my remarks very firmly on the ground of something that gets too easily and quickly dismissed in some discussions in the women's movement as non-

transformative – the simple importance of being able to earn an income, make a livelihood and survive. There is a real problem if we counterpose the ability to make an income and improve one's livelihood against some notion of a larger or more transformative social vision. In some sense, I firmly believe that the former is very much a part of and has to be part of that larger transformation. If we counterpose them, I believe, we are doing not just ourselves, but the large masses of poor women —about whom we speak all the time — a great deal of disservice. I just want to say very firmly that issues of livelihood, of survival, of work and its implications, and how those get transformed, are very much a part of what we ought to be looking at.

Another important theme in our discussions has been the talk about the media and its control. The irony is that at one and the same time, we are living in a world where media control is increasingly centralized, yet there has been an expansion and explosion of communication that has democratically transformative potential; both currently live cheek by jowl with each other. What are the implications of this? I think we need to pay more attention in the particular context of what is happening to media in this country. As someone who regularly interacts with and keeps track of what goes on in the United States and US politics, I am struck by the transformation of the democratic potential of that society (which is IT-rich beyond any other) through media control. Systematic centralization and control of different channels of mass communication by corporate and anti-secular interests has completely transformed what is considered to be knowledge. This really alerts us to the need to pay a great deal of attention to similar tendencies in our own context. The way in which mainstream media represent women, I think, leads to some bigger questions that we have to address and deal with. And so, while talking about the democratizing potential of the Internet, the baby is in the bath water right now. How do we hold the 'baby' of open and easy communication while chucking the 'bath water' of centralized and privatized control and distortion of mass information?

Let me say that I want to strongly endorse the point that was made about the insufficient distinction between and clarification of 'information' and 'knowledge'. I am trying to avoid saying 'information versus knowledge' because I believe that information is part of knowledge but, clearly, it is not all there is to knowledge. Information tends to be treated not just as something out there, but also in terms of something given to us that we consume, whereas knowledge tends to involve creative processes and interaction. But we need to more strongly theorize what this separation means and I think there is still a level of confusion in this area.

Partly because this distinction has not been clarified sufficiently, I am not clear, at this point, on what is the exact nature of the digital divide that we keep speaking about. Is it in terms of access to information? Is it in terms of access to the technology that enables access to information? Is it in terms of production of information? Is it in terms of production of knowledge? Or, is it all of these things? But, each one of these things means something quite different and I think at various points in the discussion over these past two days, it has been sort of like the five blind men (or women) and the elephant. One's analysis and description depended on which of the above one was talking about, but that wasn't always clear; and many speakers did not seem to acknowledge that the elephant may have other parts! Is the nature of the digital divide sufficiently captured by the South–North dichotomy? We know it is not. Is it captured by rich versus poor? We know it is not. Rural versus urban? Probably not.

How does gender play out in each one of these divides? We are not completely sure. I think that at the end of these two days I am left with more questions than possible answers to these issues and I think that it probably derives from some basic conceptual clarity that we need to begin working towards.

Another set of issues has to do with this business of WSIS: what is it all about? I just want to revisit the questions I had brought up earlier, raise further questions and, in doing that, also address the issue about whether we can sidestep UN conferences.

My first question is whether it is necessary to engage? It is clearly in this area that there are a great number of questions. Can we just sidestep UN conferences and their processes? Can we just not look at them? Can we forget that they exist? Do they matter? My perspective is that there are important governance issues around information that may well determine what is available to us and what is not in the not-too-distant future. The Chinese, for example, know well from the way in which the State controls the Internet what they can and cannot do. Is this type of control something that could happen on a global level, or at national levels? The content of the discussion of Internet governance at WSIS could well be the key. Second is the question of financing. Where will it come from, and who will bear the cost? Does governance have something to do with the cost? The third is, who will fight for open source, open content, open access and where, if we disengage from the WSIS space?

Given these questions, is it actually possible to engage in a meaningful way? There was debate in the seminar about whether this is a space that has, for the first time, allowed corporations to become fully legitimate partners in a UN process. Be that as it may, a major gap in our discussions was that e-commerce did not come up at all when we were talking about Internet governance. Yet, a very large proportion of what is happening over the Internet is e-commerce, and therefore, a great deal of the engagement with how it will be governed, what will happen to it, etc., is linked to questions of e-commerce, of which we hardly know about or have spoken at all in this discussion. Clearly, however, this is where there is an enormous amount of interest in relation to where the Internet goes, and how it will be shaped in the future.

So this shaping of the terrain of the debate - the scope, the content, what is included or excluded - is, whether we like it or not, something that is happening in the processes of the UN conference. The question of 'do we engage because it is happening?' is not a question of 'do we engage because the UN or the North is engaging in it?', but really whether we can afford not to engage. Some might be of the opinion that you can afford not to and you do not have to engage because, in fact, you are not going to be able to do anything. Well, perhaps that is true, although I am not highly convinced that it is. I think that many of the issues of cost and access that we, particularly as women, tend to have a great deal of concern about are not sufficiently addressed. And if they are going to be addressed at that level, then I hope that someone is present to raise the questions in the right way.

Having said that we cannot afford not to engage, the question is what exactly is the feminist perspective on this and is it different from a general perspective of marginality and marginalization? One way of looking at the feminist perspective is, of course, to say that it

involves the three 'Os'-- open source, open content and open access -- and to make sure that women are not marginalized from these three Os. Another might be to go back and say, what is gender-specific about the whole process? Does it tell us something? Does it have any connections to the very old issue of social and biological reproduction, the 'care economy' as feminist economists have named it? Does it have something to do with women as workers? What about the business of media, pornography and control? What is a feminist perspective on the right to knowledge, access and information? And what does it say in terms of its content about women's rights? Is the language of rights part of this process? It seems to me that in the two days of the seminar, we have been using terms like women, feminist, and so on, back and forth in fairly muddy ways because I think we are not completely clear about the nature of each of these perspectives.

I think IT has thrown into sharp relief many of the women's movements' fault lines and stress points. Let me say something at this point on what I earlier called the 'default settings'. When we are unsure about what a gender perspective may be on something, we tend to fall back on 'marginalization' - this is our standard default line. When we are unsure of what it is that is going on, we say, "Oh, women are marginalized", "left out of processes", "kept back", etc. And I think that we really need to move out of this default setting if we are to grapple much more seriously with the meaning of IT and the meaning of a gender perspective on IT.

One could argue that the first industrial revolution was about steam-engines and factories and had a great deal to do with how women engaged with labour processes and production processes outside the home. The second industrial revolution was about biology and chemistry and had a great deal to do with reproduction, both biological and human, and the entire birth control revolution. How do we describe what the third industrial revolution - the current one that is about information - is doing to women and to gender relations in society? Well, it is doing some revolutionary things. One that immediately comes to mind is the transformation of space and geography, which no longer delimit the way in which we interact. But at the same time, in doing that, it has also transformed the meaning of personhood -- of who we are, how we identify ourselves, who we see ourselves as part of, and what are these communities and spaces that we speak about. What does it mean then, if, as a movement, we are to engage with it? Just as the thesis of marginalization would not have got us very far in understanding the previous two revolutions, we need to move beyond the default setting of marginalization to really grapple with these questions and understand what this might mean.

A second default setting is that when we, in the women's movement, are unsure about how power works and about the capillaries of power, we tend to fall back on known and familiar polarities - middle-class versus poor, South versus North, and so on. I refer to the discussion raised earlier relating to women's experiences in these new IT work spaces. I think that we do ourselves a disservice if we move into thinking that it is just a bunch of middle-class notions to imagine that the young women workers in these spaces may actually like being there. Talking with women workers in these spaces reveals great ambivalences about how they think about their work and how they identify themselves, just as is true for garment workers working in export processing zones and those working in the global assemble line. One's views often depend on what one's alternatives are. As feminists, the one thing that we do know is that over and over and over again, when women are asked, "Would you go back to your previous situation

within the family and the home?" the response is almost always "NO". Despite everything else. So there is something about the personal transformation taking place in these work spaces that is important for us to understand because it is about the transformation of subjectivity, identity and personality. I have moved in my own earlier default position, which was that Export Processing Zones = bad! MNC= exploitation! I believe this was far too simplistic and similarly, I think that it would be far too simplistic a reading in the context of ICTs as well. A gender perspective requires us to move out of these kinds of default settings in our analysis and to really understand the nature of power.

Finally, I want to reflect for a moment on the nature of campaigning via the Internet as someone who has been engaged for almost a decade in a variety of ways in global campaigns. Global campaigns are the ones in which feminists have engaged and which lend themselves very strongly and quickly to large groups of people coming together. This is where I see IT to have been both powerful and fruitful. However, we also know what can happen with communication via the Internet. It is full of trust and carried out very informally -- we shoot off mails to people we have never met simply because somebody else sent us an e-mail saying "this is a good person". Now, in some of the campaigns that I have been engaged in, particularly the campaign around reproductive and sexual health and rights, we have learned that we cannot behave so naively any more, as these are all spaces which are now far more untrustworthy. We have to establish subsets within subsets of whom we can trust. And we need to be conscious of how information gets put out. There is the business of the information that people put out; there is the business of the disinformation that people put out; and there is the business of the spins around campaigns. It has given a whole new meaning to the idea of campaigning via the Internet.

But even if we learn to campaign at a more sophisticated level, what happens to the personal warmth, the direct communication and personal interaction that we associate with movements, with campaigning, and with meeting each other? In the women's movement, in particular, the songs and the laughter and the sitting together have been the glue or the cement that makes it possible for people to hold together in difficult times. Can the new IT tools and campaigning be brought together with the old ways of building movement solidarity in a manner that might actually allow for us to use both and still survive? I do not know if I have the answer to this because increasingly, at one level, you have the individualized campaigners who are part of these larger global campaigns, but yet, where are their sensibilities? Where are their default positions when push comes to shove and a decision has to be taken immediately? What is it that they will go for? What is their tactile sense of movement? This, I believe, is a huge challenge that the Internet poses for the women's movement today as it does for all social movements.