**Focus Group Discussion on “Women as 'Digital Subjects': Participating, Vulnerabilities and Empowerment".**

This report aims to summarize the proceedings of the first Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for the ICSSR project on “Women as 'Digital Subjects': Participating, Vulnerabilities and Empowerment" held on 19th October, 2020 at 4 pm on google meet. The Project members present during the discussion were – Dr. Manisha Madhava, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, SNDT Womens’ University, Mumbai and Principal Investigator of the ICSSR Project; Dr. Priya Singh, Associate Director, Asia in Global Affairs and Advisor to the Project; Dr. Somdatta Chakraborty, Senior Adjunct Researcher, Asia in Global Affairs and Research Project Coordinator of this ICSSR Project; and Vedika Nair, Research Intern. The invited panellists were: Dr Vibhuti Patel, Former Faculty, Advanced Centre for Womens’ Studies, School of Development Studies, TISS, Mumbai; Dr Sandhya Iyer, Associate Professor, Chairperson, Centre for Public Policy, Habitat and Human Development, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute for Social Sciences; Dr Sangeeta Mahapatra, Visiting Fellow, GIGA Institute for Asian Studies, Hamburg; Dr Sumana Kasturi, Resident Director at AIFS, Hyderabad; Nandini Chami, Deputy Director, IT for Change and Geeta Seshu, Senior journalist based in Mumbai, engaged in reporting and analysing media issues, focusing especially on freedom of expression, gender, media ethics and working conditions of journalists.

The objective of this FGD was to introduce the project to the distinguished experts and invite them to review its methodology, content and more vitally the direction which would critically help shape this research.

The discussion began with a detailed presentation by Dr. Somdatta Chakraborty. She spoke briefly on how this ICSSR project argues for an exploration of the gendered digital spaces in India, through focus group study and mixed method surveys mapping women participation across ages and varied income capacities in urban Kolkata and Mumbai and across various digital platforms. Her presentation focussed principally on the social, economic and political dimensions of such participation in varied digital platforms.

The participants were then invited to convey their thoughts and suggestions. This report compiles all their suggestions into eight broad categories.

**Key Recommendations:**

**Defining the “digital space”**

For this study, defining the digital space is of utmost importance. When we define the digital space, we describe the research setting. Dr Sangeeta Mahapatra suggested that the project can use platform analysis to define the digital space. And one needs to begin with a fundamental question: What is a platform? To define the digital space, it was suggested that the project must detail how platforms work, how people are co-scripted into these platforms, how digital subjects are constantly redefined. It is also important to note how different platforms have different logics of engagement with the public.

**Mobilization through digital media:**

Dr Vibhuti Patel identified mobilization as an important political dimension of digital media discussing how political parties, activists as also politically conscious people use apps like whatsapp, facebook etc. to build and mobilize political opinion and support. She harped on the necessity to explore to what extent women partake in such political mobilization through the digital media. She discussed how women take to the social media to talk about their problems—a trait that has increased with the outbreak of the pandemic. The Covid 19 pandemic has also seen many nurses, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers and other frontline workers use the digital platforms to convey their dissatisfaction with regard to the unavailability of PPEs, the amount of workload, meagre salaries etc. She suggested that this aspect of mobilization can be weaved into this scope of the project.

**Empowerment and Disempowerment through digital media during the pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the ability of the digital media to empower as well as disempower. For instance in pre-pandemic times, many employees were allotted smartphones and data plans by their employers. This could be perceived as an act of empowerment. However, once the lockdown was imposed, many of such employers had stopped paying their employees, thus reversing the act of empowerment. Many women lost access to the internet and social media during the lockdown and were disconnected from the outer world, facing severe social isolation.

Another example of disempowerment through digital media can be seen in the fact that the central government maintained no data on the number of frontline workers who were getting infected, or the migrant workers who had lost their jobs and lives in the pandemic-related lockdown.

The panellists suggested that in general it would be helpful to study the politics of empowerment and/or disempowerment through digital media during the COVID-19 lockdown.

**The issue of “access”**

Access is a multi-layered concept. Through the discussion it became evident that there is need to discuss its various dimensions.Firstly, it is important for the project to evaluate whether access always leads to empowerment. Merely having access to a digital medium may not be empowering if one cannot use it to their benefit. When women have the ability to made digital mediums work for them, it could be perceived as empowerment.

Secondly, the project looks at a wide age range of women participants – 18years to 55 years. Access assumes different dimensions for different ages. While both younger and older women may have smartphones, younger women might use digital and social platforms more regularly and efficiently. Similarly, access may also vary amongst the different classes that the project is looking at. The FGD highlighted that adopting stringent parameters for the urban and peri-urban categories for this study may appear problematic since people of different social classes often co-exist in the same neighbourhood. For eg., domestic workers often live very close to elite areas.

Thirdly, the FGD identified market spaces as important conduits of access. The pandemic has led many women to experiment with alternate mode of earning. And it was suggested that determining whether women and men are equally part of the e-commerce spaces and recognizing the challenges that women face could add critical value to this study.

 **Reassessment of the scientific reliability of Whatsapp as a data point**

The participants suggested that there is need to reflect upon the scientific reliability of Whatsapp as a data point. While Whatsapp is a popular medium of social messaging, it might not be a reliable scientific data point and the experts were very categorical that while conducting a survey amongst women with regard to their usage of Whatsapp, a researcher needs to be very alert about his/her own biases during evaluation.

Secondly, although Whatsapp is a popular platform common to all age groups, there is need to look beyond whatsapp. With the rate of media convergence that is happening today, there is a seamless transition between social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp and Youtube. The experts suggested that the project team needs to conduct a pilot study to select the specific platforms for this study.

**Deploying social and psychological theories to obtain a better measurement study**

Since the project focuses on the social, economic and political aspects of women participation in the digital media, the research has an extremely wide scope and Dr Sangeeta Mahapatra suggested that for a more scientific evaluation of data, social and psychological theories need to be used. Two such theories are Judith Butler’s performativity theory and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In applying the theories, the performative aspect of one’s identity creation in the social space can be combined with the hierarchy of needs, thus creating a matrix to make sense of how women prioritize their needs. Charles Horton Cooley’s idea of the “looking glass self” could also be helpful to this study.

**Reassessing the Terminology**

Dr Sumana Kasturi noted that the “online v/s real” terminology might be reworked. It is possible for both the online and the offline to be aspects of the same self that are performed differently. The online self is no less “real” than the offline self. It is often also possible for one to be their authentic self online rather than offline. The layered and nuanced nature of reality per se thus needs to be explored and to begin with, the project needs to properly define the terminologies and develop the theoretical framework before one gets into field survey.

Apart from the general recommendations, the panellists also had a few methodological suggestions.

**Methodology Recommendations:**

The experts suggested that the project could develop a more full-proof method for stratified analysis. There is also need to distinguish between the closed-ended questions and the perception questions as the project must set out clear objectives for the perception questions for a proper collection of data as otherwise the project might encounter a data muddle -a whole range of information that can’t be categorized. It was further suggested that the project needs to seriously consider factors like social pressure and peer pressure which play an important role in people’s performativity in the online as well as offline world.

The FGD thus critically helped with defining the objective and field of research as also dispelling many methodology doubts. The inter-disciplinary assemblage of experts coming from within and outside academia offered an unusually rich plethora of perspectives that have enriched the project to say the least.

Report prepared by Dr. Somdatta Chakraborty & Vedika Nair