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WOMEN, PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

by Ursula Huws

The very word 'citizenship' carries with it a connotation of place, a 'citizen' being, literally, the inhabitant of a city. Over the years the word has, of course, accumulated a number of associated meanings: a 'citizen' is generally presumed to have a range of rights (e.g. to political representation or to the protection of the law), freedoms (e.g. to travel at will, to work or to purchase property) and responsibilities (e.g. to pay taxes, to send one's children to school or to obey the law) and the word has come to stand in for such concepts as participation, equality and democracy. The fact that the concept of locality is deeply embedded in the word 'citizen' suggests that it is also fundamental to our current understanding of these other, more apparently abstract words.

In Western thought, the concepts of citizenship, equality and democracy are closely inter-linked and can be traced back to a common source, in Athens in the 5th century BC. Perhaps it is no accident that it was the same culture which also gave us, in its theatre, the concept of the unity of time and space. The Greek city-state has been represented for centuries as the ideal model of democracy, with free and equal access for all citizens to decision making. Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of who was included, and who excluded from this notion of citizenship, we can see that the sense of place is fundamental to this model. Entitlement to participate in the democratic process is circumscribed by geography; it is the inhabitants of the geographical entity of the city-state, precisely defined and bounded, who have the rights to citizenship. Those who are not defined as inhabitants of that specific city-state are explicitly excluded, although, of course, they may have the right to citizenship elsewhere.

In this model (which probably derives from a particular pattern of agriculture), the surface of the globe is carved up into a patchwork of entities, edge-to-edge, with borders which, although they may be contested, are clearly defined; and since it is not possible, in the traditional view, for any individual to be in more than one place at a time, the task of assigning people to their own patches is unproblematic. There is often also an underlying assumption that identities (racial, linguistic or religious, for instance) map neatly onto these patches of soil. History is littered with blood-spattered instances where this has not been the case: where, for instance, a grid of national frontiers has been superimposed by imperial powers onto tribal or nomadic peoples whose traditions are not space-bound, or where some ethnic groups (such as Jews or Gypsies) have a dominant allegiance to a non-geographical identity.

Nevertheless, it seems possible to assert that the dominant models of democracy and participation are rooted both in a notion of place and, more specifically, in an assumption that some coincidence between

space and time defines each individual's relationship to broader social structures. It is, above all, this identity of space and time which is challenged by the development of an 'information society', a phrase which I am using, uncomfortably, to denote the changes in the organisation of work and daily life which are facilitated by the new communications and information technologies which, in combination, are sometimes known as 'telematics'.

These technologies permit a range of new developments which undermine the traditional model of democracy:

First, by delocalising a range of economic and social activities they make a nonsense of many traditional geographical boundaries, and with them a range of associated institutions, ranging from differential tax regimes to adages like Robert Frost's famous 'good fences make good neighbours'.

Second, they allow for shifting and multiple identities enabling people to belong simultaneously to a number of different constituencies and thus weakening, if not invalidating, the notion of 'one person; one vote' (which in turn rests critically on the notion that you can only be in one place at one time)

Third, and associated with this, they make it possible for individual identity to be concealed

Fourth, they create new thresholds, in the form of access to the technology, imposing barriers to participation which act like latter-day versions of the requirements to own property which excluded all but the bourgeoisie from the right to vote in most Western 'democracies' up to the early 20th century.

To those seeking to maximise the participation of the widest number of people in the decision-making which affects their lives, these threats to traditional forms of democracy may seem harmful. Let us not forget, however, that the systems currently in place are far from perfect. and it may well be that even whilst they damage some forms of participation these new developments may open up others which could be empowering for groups which have been under-represented in the past.

In this paper I will focus specifically on women's participation and representation. Before doing so, however, I would like to make the usual disclaimers about treating 'women' as a unitary social category. A few general introductory points also need to be made about the limitations of the 'information society'

Much current discourse about the 'information society', 'knowledge-based economy' or 'weightless economy' seem to assume that, as inter-linked computers enter more and more areas of our lives, all activities will become delocalised, all products will become knowledge-intensive and weightless, and all relationships telemediated or 'virtual'. As I have written elsewhere, the evidence points overwhelmingly to a global trend which consists predominantly not of decommodification but of commodification. Indeed, the world has never seen so much consumption of raw materials, so much material production of physical goods and services, so much energy spent in transporting them from one spot to another on the earth's surface, and such a vast production of - all-too-material - waste. It seems likely that a high proportion of jobs will remain firmly rooted geographically to a given spot (be it a hospital, a school, a factory or a supermarket) whilst others, albeit mobile, will require physical co-presence at predetermined places (whether this involves laying cables or laying tables, delivering goods or delivering babies, maintaining gardens or maintaining power plants). It also seems likely that, despite the homogenising effect of global cultures dominated by transnational corporations, the distinguishing features of individual places may well become more rather than less important as localities are pushed into competition with each other for niche positions in the new global markets. The decision, for instance, whether to arrange one's honeymoon in the Seychelles, Bali or Barbados, or to get one's software

developed in India, Russia or Brazil, or to buy one's coffee from Nicaragua, Kenya or Columbia may well hinge on quite small differences. The cumulative effect of such decisions, however, may have a dramatic impact on the livelihoods of local inhabitants.

Any discussion of democracy and participation must be based in an understanding that a substantial proportion - usually a majority - of the population in any given place will be economically dependent on activities which do not involve only the processing of information but the processing or delivery of physical goods or services in real time and real space. These people, while they are carrying out these activities, will be anchored to particular, unduplicable physical locations. It is, however, one of the great ironies of our time that they will not necessarily be doing so in the places from which they originate. The globalisation processes which have produced the new international division of information processing work have also coincided with major migrations of people around the world. Increasingly we find that the jobs with the most intensive requirement for physical co-presence are also those most likely to be carried out by immigrants or refugees. Examples of these include domestic or industrial cleaners, child-care workers, low-skilled assembly workers, janitors and security guards, labourers on construction sites, sex workers and service workers in hotels and fast-food chains.

A further general point which needs to be emphasised here is that participation in the information society requires a number of pre-conditions to be met. In order, for instance, to access the Internet it is necessary to:

- Be able to read and write a global language (with a relative disadvantage if this is not English)
- Be able to use a range of software (with a relative disadvantage if this is not the latest Microsoft product or if you are using some means other than a mouse and keyboard to access it)
- Have access firstly to electricity, secondly to a telephone line with decent bandwidth and thirdly to a computer with a reasonably fast modem
- Have sufficient leisure to browse the Internet
- Have the personal ability to withstand the cultural onslaught of words and images which you may find shocking, aesthetically vulgar, blasphemous, racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise offensive

At the risk of pointing out the obvious, it is necessary to demonstrate that none of these are distributed equally. Let us compare, for instance, the number of fixed telephone lines per thousand of the population between countries. Table 1 shows the eight countries with the lowest teledensity and those with the highest

Table 1: fixed telephone lines per '000 population (ITU data, 1997)

<i>Lowest teledensity</i>		<i>Highest teledensity</i>	
Cambodia	0.78	Bermuda	758.19
Democratic Republic of Congo	0.82	Sweden	682.12
Chad	0.92	Switzerland	640.42
Afghanistan	1.35	United States	639.89

Somalia	1.53	Denmark	617.85
Liberia	1.60	Canada	602.42
Niger	1.62	Luxembourg	592.73
Mali	1.91	Iceland	573.43

Another indicator is cost. A local phone call in Armenia costs 36 times what it costs in Canada (at 18 US cents, compared with 0.5 cents) whilst the cost of an annual subscription to a phone line represents only 1% of per capita GDP in the United States, but 20% in Madagascar or Tanzania and 39% in Egypt. It would clearly be ludicrous to suggest that the citizens of these countries have equal access to the information society.

In a world where national boundaries are increasingly transcended, it is necessary to bear such differences between countries in mind when considering differences within countries or regions.

Let us now turn to a discussion of gender differences. In order to understand some of the historical forces which have shaped women's political participation and representation in the developed democracies it is perhaps useful to begin by returning to the paradigmatic democracy of the Greek city-state in the 5th Century BC. This makes it instantly clear that the universalism implied by the concept of equal citizens making decisions on the principle of one person one vote is a false one. The citizens who form the basic unit of this society are in fact a minority of the population, consisting only of men, and of men who are not slaves. To the extent that women are represented at all in the formal decision-making process, this is an indirect representation, through the persons of their fathers, their husbands or, if they are slaves, their owners.

Similarly, the 'liberty, equality and fraternity' of the French revolution (although it inspired liberation movements amongst slaves and women) was limited in its scope to men. Indeed, Rousseau (its chief ideologue) was explicit in his view that women had been created for men's' delight and their role should be limited to that of nurturer and helpmeet to men. The slow extension of the franchise which occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries in most countries extended to propertyless men before it encompassed bourgeois women.

The formal vote is not, of course, the only means of participation in public decision-making nor has it been particularly effective in delivering economic or social goods in the past. It does, however, represent in a particularly visible form the value which is placed on women's contribution in any given society.

Women have in practice found a large number of other forms of political practice, reflecting the different capacities in which they participate in society. The new information and communications technologies appear to threaten some of these. However they also offer opportunities to develop inventive new forms of organisation, communication and participation.

Some of these contradictory developments will be explored in the rest of this paper.

One significant development has been a shift in the boundary between the public and the private. In the past, in many cultures, the act of entering the public space of the political hustings or meeting has in itself been extraordinarily difficult. Indeed, as Elaine Hobby showed in her study of 17th century English women writers, even the act of self-expression involved in writing for a public audience was considered immodest and compromising to a woman's moral reputation. Her public political identity could not be separated from her gender. In the 19th century some women (most famously, perhaps, the

Bronte sisters, Georges Sand and George Eliot) assumed male pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously in print although, of course, only a small minority of relatively privileged women had access to the leisure, the education and the opportunity to write and be published.

Even on the Internet, women who present themselves as such can be subjected to forms of intimidation, harassment or even 'virtual rape'. However the Internet does offer the possibility for the first time for large numbers of people to express themselves anonymously. When the only form of communication is the digitised word, sound or image, it is possible to assume any identity. On the Internet one need in theory have neither a gender nor a race: one need be neither beautiful nor ugly, neither thin nor fat, neither old nor young, neither able-bodied nor disabled, neither bearing the accent of an expensive education nor speaking the argot of the ghetto; one can, in short, communicate as pure 'mind', detached from any physical associations. That's the theory. And there are large numbers of women, particularly women with disabilities, shy women and women from ethnic minorities, who will testify to the new-found sense of empowerment they have achieved by using the Internet as a means of communication, self-expression and participation in public debates. It must be remembered, however, that for each of these there are others who are excluded from this form of participation: for instance, by lack of time, lack of access to the technology, lack of money or lack of appropriate skills. And, even for those who are included, assuming a false identity is hardly the best way to claim attention. Indeed by making women invisible it could be seen as reinforcing the notion that the most authoritative voices are male ones.

A second, and equally contradictory effect of the new technologies is to transform the economics of communication with a wide and geographically extended audience. For those without direct access to the technology, a new barrier to communication is imposed. A computer costs much more than a pencil and paper, or a can of paint; it is much more difficult to learn to use a computer than it is to talk to other women at the village well or outside the local supermarket or school. However once that first barrier has been leaped, it becomes very much cheaper to communicate globally. The Internet has become an effective and low-cost means of international information exchange and mobilisation (for instance through the French Cyberfemmes network) and a powerful medium of publication (for instance in the Women's International Net, a web-based magazine which connects women in 93 countries and Canada's own Women'space, which is published both on the web and in paper form).

How has this new potential impacted women's ability to engage practically in decision-making? Here it is useful to distinguish between some of the different capacities in which women participate in public debate and decision-making.

One important capacity is that of the consumer. In the past, one of the ways in which women played their most prominent part in organised, public political action has been as consumers, for instance organising protests and boycotts over the price of food. Here too the impact of the new technologies and the globalisation of distribution which they enable has been highly contradictory. On the one hand, email communication and the Internet have been used effectively as tools for organising environmental consumer campaigns and boycotts. On the other, the increasingly dispersed nature of retailing has made it much more difficult to target particular distributors. It is one thing for a group of customers living in the same community to organise a picket of a particular store; quite another for isolated individuals scattered over a wide area to protest to a call centre or web site from which they are ordering goods remotely.

A second capacity in which women have participated in social decision-making has been as workers. Here too the traditional model has rested on the unity of time and space. To recruit and organise their membership, trade unions have generally relied on face-to-face methods of communication. In large workplaces like factories or offices, co-presence at the worksite has made this relatively easy, although the task has become more difficult where the introduction of flexible working patterns has multiplied the forms of contract under which workers are employed and the shift-patterns which they work. It is not uncommon in large supermarkets in the UK, for instance, for some 200 different shift patterns to be in operation simultaneously. In such a context, finding a time when the majority of the workforce can attend a meeting together may be well nigh impossible. There have always been some workers, many women amongst them, who have worked in dispersed or nomadic ways and for whom organisation has been a greater challenge. And sometimes inventive means have been adopted to overcome the difficulties. One can point, for instance, to the Ahmedabad-based Self-Employed Women's Association, which now has a larger membership than any trade union in India and which organises, amongst others, homeworkers and itinerant workers involved in such activities as rolling hand-made cigarettes and incense sticks, collecting waste materials, sewing and street vending. Homeworkers involved in manufacturing activities have also organised effectively in many other cities, including Toronto. So too have domestic workers, notably in South Africa during the Apartheid years. Such activities have usually been based in strong community networks, something which may become more difficult in the fracturing of local communities which accompanies economic migration and globalisation.

The delocalisation of work involving the processing of information is contradictory in its effects. On the one hand it breaks up the traditional office, enabling work to be done at a distance, often in the home, by a remote workforce. On the other, it introduces new divisions of labour (often highly Tayloristic) and recombines and concentrates onto single sites tasks which may once have been scattered through a network of small branch offices or stores. The call centre or specialist data entry function bears many of the hallmarks of the traditional factory: a large concentration of workers involved in repetitive routinised tasks with highly monitored and stressful working conditions. There is considerable evidence that trade union organisation is flourishing in such conditions (in one recent UK survey of call centres, over half were organised, compared with under a third across the economy as a whole). Indeed, call centre workers appear to be pioneering new forms of collective organisation across national frontiers. One example of this was a joint agreement negotiated by trade unions in Canada, the United States and Britain with Air Canada.

Evidence on the use of the Internet for worker organisation is patchy. The Internet is clearly a useful tool for organising solidarity action and is used as such, the UK-based Labour Telematics Project offering just one example. Associations of teleworkers or telecommuters have also been set up in a number of European countries and also, I believe, in Canada.

There are a large number of web-sites aimed at homeworkers, many simply electronic versions of the dubious 'get rich quick' advertisements traditionally found in local newspapers or taped to street-lamps and aimed at the desperate. Some commercial sites however have bulletin boards which are aimed at home-based workers. Some of these sites consciously target women. The Ivillage Work-at-home site, for instance, adopts the patronising style of a traditional women's magazine, placing chatty advice for 'mompreneurs' about setting up a home-based business in amongst cheery hints about childcare, weight-loss and keeping fit. Whilst its heavily-moderated message-board may act as a source of social support for some isolated home-based workers, it can hardly be regarded as an active channel of participation.

Other, more subversive, web-sites, run by workers themselves, appear to be emerging. Internet searches provide interesting clues that nascent organisations are beginning to engage in the sorts of dialogue which may well be precursors to more formal 'virtual' trade union organisation. One example is Temp 24-7 , whose main purpose seems to be to enable temporary workers to share their frustrations with each other. Another site, that of Working Today , describes itself as "a national non-profit membership organization that promotes the interests of people who work independently - a diverse group that now makes up nearly 30% of the American laborforce. Our members are freelancers, independent contractors, temps, part-timers, contingent workers, and people working from home." The organisation boasts 60,000 members and fifteen affiliated organisations and offers its members practical information about employment rights and wage rates, health insurance and legal services. One of its affiliated organisations is the World Wide Web Artists Consortium which alongside its Internet-based special interest groups and email discussion lists has started to offer that most non-virtual of activities: the monthly meeting! I should emphasise, however, that my knowledge of these organisations is limited to what can be gleaned from their web-sites, and this illustrates perfectly what is perhaps the single greatest difficulty with virtual organising: how do you know whether the other person is telling the truth? Even if you do know the organisation, how do you know that the person you are dealing with is truly representative of it? Is the information you are receiving a genuine consensus of views, or just the personal opinion of the group's resident nerd? Without some pre-existing knowledge of ones communication partners it is difficult to build the relationship of mutual trust which is a precondition for any effective joint initiative.

Another form of social engagement in which women have participated in the past has been in the creation of prefigurative models for what Sheila Rowbotham has called a 'new moral world' . Such initiatives move beyond the reactive or defensive strategies of protest, or the ticking of boxes on ballot forms, to the development of new social forms. These include an enormous range of projects, including co-operatives, credit unions, collective childcare arrangements, alternative health projects and the development of new environmentally friendly products and services. They offer a collective vision of an alternative way of living and, as such, contribute enormously to the shared political culture. There is no space in this short paper even to begin to chronicle the many and varied forms these have taken, but it is in this area that the new technologies seem to have most to offer, providing not just new means of communicating but richer and more interactive ways of developing new visions and sharing them over time and space.

In the past, there have always been women who have seized on whatever technology or means of communication is available and adapted it for their own use. Sometimes in secret, sometimes in the course of their work, they learned to read and write, to read Latin and Greek, to speak English, to use typewriters, telephones, addressographs, photocopiers, faxes, word processors, loud-hailers and tape recorders. In out-of-hours workplaces and basements and around kitchen tables they stapled and roneoed, addressed and packed, sewed banners, made placards, learned songs. The computer with its Internet connection can be seen as a continuation of this process: a tool among many. Like other tools, these reflect the priorities of their designers and have characteristics which distort the processes of the user, and like others they do not leave their users untouched. Just as the telephone created new forms of vision-free intimacy, so email generates another kind of inter-personal contact, a strange intimacy without touch or tone of voice, in which misunderstandings can multiply. These media also create enormous difficulties of prioritisation, whereby remote events are constantly interrupting local ones in the competition for our time and attention. We do not just need new intellectual and manual skills to use them well, we also need new emotional skills. However it is important not to forget that these are just

tools. Whilst they have the potential to open up new possibilities for communication and mental creativity they cannot in and of themselves change most of the material circumstances of our daily lives. The body which sits at the keyboard, perhaps with aching neck-muscles and sore wrists, is still at the end of a day a physical body occupying real time and real space, getting on with the business of digesting real food, circulating real blood and all the other myriad processes, known and unknown to science, which make up the act of living. This body may be hot or cold, hungry or overfed, tired or energetic; it may be in a comfortable middle-class house or a shack temporarily rigged up as a cyber-café, it may have children clinging to it, young men attempting to patronise it, bosses waiting to be served by it. The surrounding environment might be urban or rural; there might or might not be an uninterrupted supply of electricity, running water, sewerage, free primary schools, a health centre or freedom to speak out politically. But wherever it is, it is located somewhere. And, under present political conditions, that somewhere is where participation and representation are needed.

The superimposition onto this physical patch of land of other overlapping geographies (of markets, of languages, of organisational cultures, of trading pacts, of finance capital and of political domination, to name but a few) enormously complicates this process of participation and representation. Because the local is increasingly shaped by the global, a global awareness and, sometimes, global campaigning and action may be required to intervene in the processes which determine its institutions and policies and the distribution of its resources. It seems unlikely, however, that local presence and local action can ever be dispensed with entirely. The trick will be to find new ways to use the new information and communications technologies not to reinforce existing polarities but to reduce them, so that they can become instruments of mutual support and solidarity between local communities of women.

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Notes

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