Cyberspace does not intgrate with public space in Iran

From a socio-cultural perspective, public spaces are places of interaction and communication. Public space is part of the public sphere and shares a significant role in the establishment of civil society, developing citizenship, and increasing social inclusion. Women, however, are a disadvantaged group in terms of public space. They are not reaping the benefits of public spaces compared to men. Urban spaces for women, therefore, do not carry the same excitement as they do for men. Additionally women's access to public spaces has been a historical challenge in Iran.

Similar to public space, cyberspace provides a place of interaction and communication. Cyberspace offers new forms of communication that potentially enable women to break through their often isolated social situation. It affords advantages in terms of surmounting hierarchies. Cyberspace can play an important role in developing public sphere and increasing social inclusion as public space do.

In this study we have assessed cyberspace's potential in compensating women's disadvantages in public spaces. We try to figure out women's motivation in using cyberspace, cyberspace and public space's aspects that women are more prosperous at them, and the role of cyberspace in increasing social inclusion. There are some research that focus on the capability of cyberspace in developing democracy. They mostly concentrate on political issues and do not consider people's everyday life. Hence, we adopt qualitative method to get more familiar with different aspects of this issue.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1- Lack of social trust and insecurity feeling is the most important obstacle in using cyberspace as a public space.

2- Connecting cyberspace and public space is the most fruitful way to proliferate the advantages of each.

3- Women almost cannot increase their social capital through cyberspace because they usually use cyberspace to maintain their relationship not for creating new connection.

4- Women who do not feel safe or do not participate in group activity in public space behave almost in the same manner in cyberspace.

THE RESEARCH

Methodology

We utilized a qualitative approach as a research method. Data for this study were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 38 women aged between 15 and 33 years. The sample was selected in order to cover a diversity of positions and opinions from Isfahan city and based on the theoretical sampling method. We started from the acquaintances that we knew they have access (physical access) to Internet in their home and at least use one of items including: social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), e-mail, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk, Skype, and OOVOO. The sample was diverse in terms of age, education, access to public spaces and access to cyberspace. To answer research questions we have coded interviews. Through the coding process we discovered 5 categories for women's limitations in access to public spaces, 4 categories related to virtual communication, and 4 categories for social inclusion. A qualitative data analysis was carried out based on these categories.

Findings

1- Women cannot benefit fully from cyberspace because of lacking social trust and insecurity feeling. This problem usually related to men. Government according to Islamic values impedes men and women relationship and amplifies gender separation. To do so they have been ruining the trust between men and women to make them avoid mixing each other. A large number of popular magazines, TV programs, and movies depict men as abuser and women as victim. The first essential step is mending the lost social trust between men and women. It will come true by social planning for reducing gender inequality and gender disparity and conquering with gender stereotypes.

Although limitations around women and men relationship motivate them to use cyberspace, most of these virtual relationship start and stop in cyberspace. Additionally, the preliminary purpose of connecting with opposite sex leads to non beneficial interactions. The core of these relationships is mostly sexual

matters. It seems that by diminishing normative and government limitation around women and men relationship cyberspace can be more productive space.

Most women experience public space and cyberspace indirectly and this problem exacerbate their insecurity feeling. The patriarchal project has the support of some women who find their security in the domestic sphere and who prefer not to have to interact in public spaces. Therefore, their family shapes their imagination about public spaces. Their imagination about cyberspace is meanwhile shaped by the government. So women should get aware of their imprecise image from cyberspace and then be encouraged to experience virtual world by themselves.

2- Connecting public space with cyberspace is the most fruitful way to proliferate the advantages of each. In this way they can compensate for opposing disadvantages and mutually develop. Mixing these spaces can transform them into more creative places by increasing social capital and decreasing lack of interest and insecurity feeling. Through cyberspace they can see a summary of people's lives such as their personal, educational, and occupational information, photos, favorites, and etc. Via public spaces they can see people's appearance, behavior, and so on.

In this study we identify those who have high access to cyberspace intend to connect their social and virtual lives more than others. Different limitations to women's access to public spaces spoil cyberspace's potential as a public space. It appears that for motivating women to connect their social and virtual lives, conquering the digital divide is vital. ICT regulations play an important role in bridging the digital divide, but in Iran this is largely a neglected field. In addition Government can diminish these barriers with respect to people's privacy and stopping sites restriction.

3- Women are not active in starting relationship through cyberspace as a consequences of lack of trust, insecurity feelings, and lack of interest toward virtual communication. They usually use cyberspace to maintain their relationships. They do not benefit from cyberspace for interacting with new people. Women often communicate and interact with who they know. As a result they do not add new ones and new potential to their social networks. Hence, they are not able to increase their social capital through cyberspace.

Some time students or employees start a relationship in educational and occupational context. Although most of these relationships do not continue in real life, women can increase their social capital in this way. Inversely, women with no involvement in educational and occupational work and limited access to public space search for personal, emotional, and sexual relationship in cyberspace. They get bored after awhile and end their relationship. Many of them have a lot of experience from frequent virtual friendship. Increasing social capital and having a reach social network is not their concern. If they get involve with social and cultural activity (e.g. NGO, charity foundations), they will be more prosperous in cyberspace.

4- Public spaces form people's activities in cyberspace. When civil society is not established, free interaction and communication cannot take place in public spaces. Accordingly, cyberspace has less opportunity to develop civil society and citizenship. On one hand, there is no place for practicing democracy. People in cyberspace hence cannot behave in a democratic manner. On the other hand, cyberspace faces limitations that prevent the establishment of civil society.

Participants' function in cyberspace and public space is alike in form. Those who are disadvantage in public space usually are not advantage in cyberspace; for example women who do not feel safe, interact with new ones, and participate in group activity in public space behave almost in the same manner in cyberspace. It seems that empowering women to be more active and creative citizen lead to their prosperity in cyberspace.

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