

Think Piece

**Gender and information society in
Central America: Between the
immediate and the strategic scenarios**

Margarita Salas

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The **Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society** (CITIGEN) research programme, launched in 2010, aims to explore the notion of marginalised women's citizenship as a normative project or an aspiration for equitable social membership contained in the promise of an emerging techno-social order. Six research partners from Sri Lanka, Philippines, China, Thailand/Taiwan, Bangladesh and India are studying various aspects of the terrain. Also three eminent scholars of the field from Costa Rica, Pakistan and Thailand, are writing think pieces delving into the research subject from their perspectives to further enrich the research process.

Think Pieces are paper contributions by prominent scholars and practitioners studying the intersections between the micro-context of community information ecologies and macro socio-political developments.

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Gender and information society in Central America – Between the immediate and strategic scenarios

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2011

Published by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India

CITIGEN Asia Research Programme 2010-2012

The programme is coordinated by IT for Change, Bengaluru, India (www.ITforChange.net) and carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada (<http://publicwebsite.idrc.ca/EN/>)

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1. Central America: A small region with large disparities

In terms of land extension, Central America¹ is a small region (522 760 square km). Its closest northern neighbour, Mexico, has over three times the territory. Nevertheless, the differences among the countries that form Central America are significant. In average, a person born in Guatemala has half the amount of school years than in El Salvador, earns a third of the annual wage of a Panamanian and will have a life expectancy six years shorter than in Costa Rica.

Table 1: Human development and socio-economic indicators

	Human Development Index	Gender Inequality Index	Life expectancy (years)	Education (years)	Income (GDP per capita)	Population
Guatemala	0.56	0.71	70.8	4.1	4 761	14 376 900
El Salvador	0.66	0.65	72	7.7	6 660	6 194 100
Honduras	0.60	0.68	72.6	6.5	3 845	7 615 600
Nicaragua	0.57	0.67	73.8	5.7	2 632	5 822 300
Costa Rica	0.73	0.50	79.1	8.3	11 143	4 639 800
Panama	0.76	0.63	76	9.4	13 210	3 508 500

Source: <http://hdrstats.undp.org>. Retrieved on 24 February 2011

This social reality is also reflected in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). According to the ICT Development Index of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Nicaragua is ranked 24 out of 25 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and the cost of the ICT price basket in Nicaragua represents almost 20% of its annual Gross Domestic Income, whereas it does not reach even 1% in Costa Rica. This is particularly relevant if one takes into account that in Nicaragua, telecommunication services are all handled by private providers and in Costa Rica, they have been managed as a state monopoly with crossed subsidies between high income services (such as international telephony and mobiles) and low income services (such as public phone booths and fixed telephony)².

1 When we refer to the Central American region refers to the six Spanish speaking countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Given its history and language (English), although Belize is geographically located in this region, it is usually considered to be a part of the Caribbean region.

2 The State monopoly was eliminated in 2009 through the approval of Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), but as of 2011 the regulations have not been fully completed to allow the private sector to start providing telecommunication services.

Table 2: Telecommunication indicators

	IDI* Regional Rank	Broadband as % of GDI	Mobiles (in millions)	ICT price basket (as % of GDI)
Guatemala	22	2	11.6	7,39
El Salvador	21	1.7	6.2	4.47
Honduras	23	No data	6.5	No data
Nicaragua	24	6.4	3	19.68
Costa Rica	13	0.6	1.6	0.84
Panama	10	0.7	3.6	2,18

Source: ITU (2010), *Measuring the Information Society*. Retrieved from <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2010/index.html>, 1 August 2011.

The heavy disparities among Central American countries are closely related to their history. One can identify Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala as the poorest countries of the region, El Salvador progressively reaching a middle ground and then Costa Rica and Panama as the richest. The first four countries have a long history of militarisation, civil war and armed conflict, specially during the 1970s and 1980s, with the subsequent toll on social investment in the areas of education, health, infrastructure and also economic growth and employment. The region was able to reach peace agreements in 1987, through the *Acuerdos de Paz de Esquipulas II* (Esquipulas Peace Agreement)³.

However, it is important to mention that even though peace agreements were formally signed, some of the paramilitary groups that terrorised entire populations were never successfully disarmed and their existence was never recognised by some governments. Civil society organisations, have repeatedly denounced the political persecution they still face, especially in Guatemala . Also, the military coup of 2009 in Honduras has not been recognised by the national authorities and currently any form of social mobilisation is met with military repression and police brutality. An in depth analysis of the experiences would demonstrate that peace and democracy are still highly fragile in Central America. This situation was denounced by the women's movement, through the *Regional Feminist Programme La Corriente*:

“We, the Central American women, deny that the region is living a period of transition to democracy solely because the military conflicts have ceased; we deny that one can speak of political democracy in conditions of extreme poverty or that election mechanisms are by themselves democratising factors. There can be no democracy without having created individual and collective autonomy for the citizens.” (Aguilar *et al.*, 1997: 46)

³ For more information see: Araya M., *Historia de la Paz en Centroamérica*. Retrieved from <http://www.cemedco.org/publicaciones/maraya001-HistPazCA.pdf>, 26 August 2011.

This social turmoil is the political background of a region that started developing information society policies from the mid 1990s. It is clear that the priorities of the region were focused on recomposing the social fabric and renegotiating the terms of coexisting in societies under heavy ideological polarisation. One can safely assume that this context explains the need to portray the image that the new ICT related policies were targeted at social inclusion, instead of following the European tendency towards the enterprise and productive arenas:

“The first goal was to develop telecommunication infrastructure, to close the access gap to these technologies, since it's a basic requirement so that people can benefit from the use of electronic applications. The other two areas were education and government management, where ICTs can contribute to improve scope and efficiency in services. (...) In the case of education, the need to generate capacities for the effective use of ICTs pressured the formative institutions, first at the university level, then at primary and secondary education, to incorporate this issue by forming professionals in the area and using these technologies in the education establishment.” (Guerra and Jordan, 2010: 11)

In 2005 the Action Plan on Information Society for Latin America and the Caribbean was formulated (eLAC⁴), as a technical-political mechanism for ICT development at a regional level. In Central America, although only Guatemala and El Salvador have formally developed plans directly related with eLAC, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama have national science and technology plans and are in the process of developing specific information society agendas. Honduras is the only country in the region where there are no specific plans identified, however it is important to note that at the time when the consultation process was undertaken by the eLAC, the country was in the middle of a political revolt due to a military coup.

In line with the tendency shown in Latin America and the Caribbean, the national plans and strategies in Central America also showcase an important focus on ICTs for social development. For example, the national Agenda for Information Society of Guatemala starts with the following quote from the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS):

“Information technologies must be useful to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve basic universal education, eliminate gender, race or religion based inequities, reduce infant mortality, fight against the AIDS virus and other epidemic diseases, maintain environmental sustainability and achieve world peace” (Scheel, 2007: 7)

Although the discourse points towards a social agenda, the reality speaks otherwise. Guatemala, for example, has the lowest rank on the Human Development Index and highest on the Gender Inequality Index of the region although the official discourse supports universal education and gender equality.

4 For more information see: <http://www.cepal.org/SocInfo/eLAC>, 26 August 2011.

Another important landmark is the approval of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which consolidated the neoliberal model in the region, leading to the privatisation of all telecommunication services and an extension of benefits and privileges to transnational companies and capital for operating in these countries. The Central American Network for Monitoring CAFTA held a press conference in July 2010, stating that:

“After 4 years of CAFTA in the region, some of the concrete effects point to a negative trade balance with the United States, judicial demands from corporations with U.S. capital against Central American States and maximum profits for monopolistic importers with negative effects for the consumers. (...) CAFTA is an agreement tailor-made for the U.S. that pillages the natural resources and fundamental goods (land, water, public services, etc.) from our countries and promotes investments that are a threat for the sovereignty of Central America.”⁵

After CAFTA was approved, several Canadian and U.S. based mining companies have started explorations in the region, in protected natural areas and reserves. So far, the social movements in each country have been able to stop the processes using a combination of popular mobilisation and legal resources to pressure their governments into revoking the exploration permits. However, the companies have started legal processes against the governments, sheltered by the legislation contained in CAFTA⁶.

This political and economic environment, as well as the lack of opportunities, has led to a dynamic of migration flows to northern regions (such as the North America and Europe) but also to other Central American countries. According to estimations by the International Organisation for Migrations (IOM, 2001) approximately 350,000 Nicaraguans have migrated to Costa Rica. Considering, that Costa Rica has 4.6 million inhabitants, this significant migration flow represents over 7.6% of the country's total population.

To summarise, Central America is a region with a history of armed conflict that has not been fully resolved yet and a neoliberal economic model that prioritises foreign investment over local development, even at the cost of sacrificing its natural resources and a socio-economic reality of poverty and inequity that expels citizens from their home countries in search of better conditions.

2. Feminist movements: Strong in ICT use, weak on information society policies

The origins of the women's movement in Central America can be traced to the second half of the 1980s. Although women have always organised and participated in social struggles, during this

5 For more information see: <http://168.234.202.47/index.php/nacional/guatemala/reportajes-y-entrevistas/131123-a-cuatro-anos-del-tlc-el-balance-es-positivo-o-negativo>, 10 September 2011.

6 For more information see: http://www.cispes.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=824&Itemid=50, 26 August 2011.

decade they took a stronger position to make gender discrimination visible, independent of the class and sector that women belonged to.

Aguilar *et al.* (1997) point out that the women's movement emerges from within other social movements, which creates certain conflicts of autonomy in the construction of its identity and demands. Among some of the factors that contribute to its emergence are- a weakening of the popular movement and the crisis of left wing parties; the economic crisis that pushes women to find options for their economic survival; the crisis of political and ideological paradigms in the 1980s; the support of international cooperation, and the boom of the feminist movement in the wider Latin American and Caribbean region.

The origins of the women's movement in each country are distinct, although in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua it is a very grassroots oriented movement because of close ties with the revolutionary movements and resistance groups. In Costa Rica, given the existence of democratic conditions, there was room for more political organisation, hence the women's movement is more institutionalised, a characteristic that the movement struggles with even today. In Panama, the origins of the feminist movement were predominantly urban and linked to the academic sector.

The NGOisation of the feminist movement is a deep concern for the movement.

“All sources indicate an important process of institutionalisation of the feminist movement in Central America in the last decades, which places the mobilisation activities at a second level. The wave of NGOs generated during this time has specialised in assessing the political measures targeted at women, implementing projects and strengthening social services.”
(Bengoetxea, 2009: 38)

Nevertheless, regardless of these internal tensions, the feminist movement has become a strong stakeholder in each of the Central American countries. It has ample capacity to mobilise at the grass-roots level, as well as use advocacy and legal resources for effecting change in other actors of the landscape. Its demands have grown to encompass the wider feminist vision that fights against gender inequity, but also takes a stand against all social relations that oppress, exploit and marginalise others. The classic feminist demands are still present: to end domestic violence against women and to obtain full sexual and reproductive rights, though the movement's agenda has now expanded. There are eco-feminist proposals, where the approach is more focused on the relationship between humankind and nature; there are feminist groups concerned with economic models which encompass a range of proposals from the gift economy to variations of social economy. However, one of the issues that has been given almost no priority in the agenda of the Central American

feminist movements, is the information society.

Although there are several social organisations that conduct research and build on information society issues, the subject is not seen as a major concern for any social movement, and is therefore addressed from a rather operational and functional perspective. Even though there are initiatives to develop the capacity of ICT use of marginalised groups (women, indigenous population, rural population) and there are information society observatories in universities and research projects in NGOs or think tanks, advocacy initiatives are scarce.

One of the closest approaches to a political vision of the information society would be the free software and open culture networks that have started to position issues regarding openness, privacy and commons in the public agenda. However these initiatives are very recent and have yet to consolidate as a strong stakeholder in the region.

“In principle we are a movement of resistance against the market logic that establishes that everything must be paid, monetised. We commodify everything from friendship to ideas. It has not always been this way, there used to be a lot more sharing. Now there is a boom of free software and open knowledge, but just like the industry has seen natural resources as a business, it is also seeing open knowledge as an area to be commercially exploited.” (Carolina Flores, Central American Free Software Community)

The other group that has come close to addressing the information society issues, are the organisations that work in alternative media and communications. The growing popularisation of ICTs has opened up a window of opportunity for communication initiatives that were struggling with the costs traditionally associated with broadcasting or printing their message. Some of these organisations have started using ICTs and are starting to analyse the implications that ICT policies have for their work, especially in terms of freedom of speech, privacy of information and censorship. An example of this type of articulation is the network of alternative media:

“The network of alternative media and communication initiatives is a space that promotes the democratisation of communication, access to information, freedom of expression and making visible a diversity of voices and stakeholders. This way we contribute to the construction of an alternative discourse to the hegemonic model and to the system of pre-established social relationships, by developing practices that recognise diversity, solidarity and the importance of participation and empowerment.”⁷

One of the elements that contributes to the distance between the feminist agenda and information society issues is the way many women relate to technology. Patriarchal socialisation patterns have alienated women from technology and made them perceive it as an element whose comprehension is out of their reach. The language of the information society is very technological and it has been

7 For more information see: <http://redmica.org/nosotros.php> , 10 September 2011.

difficult for the feminist movement in Central America to see past this technocracy in order to flesh out the social and political implications of what is constantly masked as technological decisions.

The number of women involved in technological careers and organisations has grown significantly. However, this has not necessarily translated into a shift of the information society agenda, as most of these women do not consider themselves feminists or analyse their reality from a feminist perspective. Hence, in the best case scenario, their presence has translated in initiatives to include more women, but they still lack the conceptual and ideological tools that could contribute in the deconstruction of the patriarchal hegemony in the current techno-social paradigm.

One of the few feminist organisations that has approached the information society issues from an advocacy perspective is Feminist Radio International Endeavour (FIRE)⁸. In September 2005, FIRE convened a seminar titled 'Women Subverting Excluding Informational Orders'⁹, which gathered Central American and Latin American feminists. The participants wrote an open letter to the World Summit on Information Society:

“History has shown that women are the main transmitters of local knowledge and popular wisdom. We create science, culture and art. We make politics and actively participate in the public life of our countries. (...) The objectives of a democratic information society are not being achieved because:

- There has been no room for the voices, interests, needs and contributions of half of humanity: the women;
- Knowledge has been privatised, instead of being shared and socialised;
- Information has become a commodity, in detriment of the great majority;
- With the excuse of world security, privacy is being violated;
- The technological advancements do not guarantee social justice, democracy, sustainable development or integral citizenship if the structural conditions that perpetuate exclusion are not transformed.”¹⁰

This manifesto, demonstrates that when the feminist movement analyses the information society issues, it is able to identify the manner in which, at a structural level, the hegemonic approach clashes with the feminist perspective. Nevertheless, this standpoint has not been enough for the issue to become strategic to the movement. For example, there was no follow up action taken post seminar, which was clearly a space of in depth analysis that could have been an opportunity to articulate regional advocacy initiatives among key feminist stakeholders with a clear understanding of the issues at stake.

8 For more information see: www.fire.or.cr, 26 August 2011.

9 For more information see: <http://www.radiofeminista.net/sept05/notas/audios.htm>, 26 August 2011.

10 See full text at:

http://www.ciudadaniasexual.org/publicaciones/Carta_a_la_Cumbre_sobre_la_Sociedad_de_la_Informaci%F3n.pdf, 26 August 2011.

As new generations of female digital natives join the feminist movement, strategic uses of ICTs for campaigns, networking and public advocacy become more frequent. This is one of the ways in which the movement has begun closing the digital gap. However, this still does not translate into an analysis of the political implications of the use of these tools, not even at the most immediate level of privacy and online security. This is worrisome because, on one hand the older feminist generation that was much more aware of security issues given the heavy state persecution it dealt with, does not have enough technological knowledge to grasp the implications of this new practice. On the other hand, the newer generations have shown a tendency to make a less critical analysis of the uptake of the tools, since they have grown up with them. Hence they are also unaware that by use of ICT tools and network to handle information they are also opening up new channels for State surveillance and control. As Gurumurthy states:

“This shift (between old media and digital media) has rendered inadequate our categories for interpreting media through a feminist lens and the basic questions around identity, difference, representation and participation.” (Gurumurthy, 2010: 2)

3. Examples from the region

A) *Honduras: Resistance against the military coup*

In June 2009, a military coup in Honduras overthrew the democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya, who was seized from his home by the armed forces and ousted to Costa Rica (Malkin, 2009). The official version of the facts claims that he was guilty of constitutional disruption for attempting to conduct a popular referendum that would enable him to be re-elected. However, the social movements have denounced the referendum stating that the purpose was an integral reform to the constitution of Honduras, that included important measures to redistribute resources and power in the country¹¹.

The Government of Honduras never recognised the coup as an illegitimate act, on the contrary, it deployed heavy military repression against all public demonstrations opposed to the coup. Dozens of activists have been killed and hundreds of them have disappeared. In November 2009 the government organised fraudulent elections to give legitimacy to its uptake of power. Although the Organisation of American States (OAS) initially condemned the coup, rejected the elections and expelled Honduras from the OAS, in May 2011 it accepted the country back and declared normal conditions in Honduras. Nevertheless, the alternative media and social movements tell a different story.

During the six months of the heaviest repression against the population (June-November 2009), the government forcefully influenced all media channels and even persecuted the ISP providers. One of the social organisations that hosted the .hn domains had to look for asylum in Costa Rica and re-route their services in order to guarantee the movement *Honduras en Resistencia* (Honduras in Resistance) the only channel they were able to use to tell the world what was really happening in the country.

Although Honduras has low rates of internet penetration, people used a combination of mobiles and community radios to send and receive information from the different parts of the country. The feminist movement organised a group called *Feministas en Resistencia* (Feminists in Resistance) and permanently documented the abuses of the armed forces using a video channel in You Tube. In other Latin American countries feminist groups organised demonstrations at the Hondurian embassies in their countries, in solidarity with the resistance movement in Honduras. Given the heavy control over media carried out by the dictatorial regime, the *Feministas en Resistencia* use a

¹¹ For more information on the *Honduras en Resistencia*, the network that gathered the social groups against the military coup see: <http://resistenciahondurena.blogspot.com>, www.resistenciahonduras.net, 10 September 2011.

lot of video and photography to show what continues to happen in the country till date¹².

The blogs and online spaces that the resistance created in 2009 are alive and active two years later, and have become an important space to coordinate and strengthen this social movement that demands the return of President Zelaya and asks for constitutional reform in Honduras. They regularly circulate information through mailing lists and video channels to other social movements and organisations in the rest of Latin America.

From time to time the repression escalates and a social activist of the resistance is arrested. Communication networks are then activated and groups from different parts of the world start sending in letters and faxes with the demand that the person be released. This mechanism has saved the lives of several activists and is another piece of evidence to show that the oppressive regime has not ended in Honduras.

The feminist group *Feministas en Resistencia*¹³ has been a key stakeholder in this struggle and their participation has had an impact in the way social movements and the Hondurian society perceive the feminist movement, because, as in many places, they were more traditionally linked with the agenda of sexual and reproductive rights as well as domestic violence. Although these issues are still important for them they have taken a public stance against violence in a more macro-structural sense and continue to organise demonstrations and demand the recognition of the military coup and sanctions for those responsible for the violence exercised against the population of Honduras, under their motto:

“¡NI GOLPES DE ESTADO, NI
GOLPES A LAS MUJERES!
¡ALTO A LA VIOLENCIA
CONTRA LAS MUJERES!
LA REVOLUCION SERA
FEMINISTA, O NO SERA.”¹⁴



In the face of those who executed the coup, feminist resistance.

Source: www.palabrademujer.wordpress.com

12 Video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUHh3Wq2big>, 26 August 2011.

13 For more information see: <http://feministascontraelgolpehn.blogspot.com>, 26 August 2011.

14 We don't want blows/coups against the state or blows against women, stop violence against women, the revolution

B) *Nicaragua: Government control of media*

Between the years 1998 and 2000 the main left wing party of Nicaragua (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional – FSLN*) and the right wing party (*Partido Liberal Constitucional – PLC*) established a pact known as '*El Pacto*' (The Pact), to establish a two-party system and increase their political control over congress and the government (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2010).

In 2006, in the context of the electoral campaign, the FSLN traditionally a left-wing socialist party, developed a pact with the hierarchy of the Catholic church in Nicaragua in order to gain more votes. As part of this pact, Daniel Ortega, the leader of the FSLN, launched a conservative campaign under the motto: 'socialism re-born under Christian values' and agreed to penalise therapeutic abortion¹⁵, setting the sexual and reproductive rights agenda several decades back.

The feminist movement started a strong campaign against this arbitrary measure. The response of the government was to persecute several feminist organisations, revoking their legal permits, interrupting their work with search warrants and throwing legal accusations against the organisations. As other social movements started to protest against these reactions, the government took similar measures against them.

One of the measures the government of Ortega has implemented in order to exert its power, is to progressively increase its ownership of mass media. It has begun buying out television channels, radio stations and even newspapers. In this context, for the social movement in general, and the feminist movement in particular, the use of social media has become imperative.

Although Nicaragua is a country with high levels of poverty a recent study conducted by the *Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO)*¹⁶ shows that there are over 500,000 Nicaraguans on Facebook and the numbers keep growing exponentially. One of the ways in which people, especially young people, have access to technologies is through cyber cafes. Since the price for an hour of connectivity is close to the price of a newspaper, they often use it to see the news, chat and check their email.

Mobile telephony also plays an important role in providing access. As Elvira Cuadra mentions: “there are homes where the family does not have a television or a landline, but they do have a

will be a feminist revolution or none at all.

15 Therapeutic abortions are performed to preserve the health or life of a woman who has complications related with her pregnancy. Since therapeutic abortions were penalised in Nicaragua, hundreds of women have died.

16 Interview with Leonor Zúñiga, researcher of CINCO, May 2011. (www.cinco.org.ni)

mobile”¹⁷. Nevertheless, the researcher also warns about the important digital gaps between the urban and rural settings, as well as between older and younger generations. The fact that women have now similar and sometimes even higher levels of education than men, has enabled girls to obtain the skills required to participate in technologically mediated spaces.

The increasing control of media by the government has established an environment of preventive censorship in the country. The owners of radio stations and television channels fear intervention by the government and will avoid any issues that might give rise to political conflict. Although the social organisations have resorted to the use of Internet, they have often been hacked and online communications have been interrupted during moments of critical articulation.

One way to address these issues could be reforming the telecommunications regulation. However, the different social organisations agree that this implies a great risk, as the government has already tried to promote legislation that broadens its ability to censor and regulate content.

The feminist movement mainly uses online spaces to express dissent, develop campaigns and bring international pressure on relevant issues. In 2007, when there was heavy persecution against the feminist leaders, they used the different networks to gain support from international and regional organisations.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) movement has also developed some national initiatives to make diversity more visible. For example, annually they run a campaign called *Gay Feliz* (Happy Gay) and on that day they ask people to place the hashtag #gayfeliz on every Twitter message to make it the trendy topic of the day.



Source: <http://espacionicaragua.blogspot.com>

17 Interview with Elvira Cuadra, researcher of CINCO, March 2011. (www.cinco.org.ni)

Activists feel that one of the positive outcomes of the use of Internet tools is that women, who have had a more oral tradition, have begun to express their thoughts in written form through blogs and social networks. They consider this change in communication style a positive shift that will enable their ideas to have broader dissemination, since a lot of Nicaraguans use mobile telephones that do not have good access to video but can handle text.

The women's movement has also clarified that in Nicaragua the use of ICTs is still related to dissemination and not so much articulation of actions, since access is limited in certain rural areas and face to face communication, as well as word of mouth, continues to be the main way to coordinate.



"I demand respect". Source: <http://observadorglobal.com>



"My body is mine". Source: <http://heterodoxia.wordpress.com>

One of the latest campaigns they organised was the national chapter of the Slutwalk ('*La marcha de las putas*'), a global response to the comments of a Canadian cop holding women responsible for sexual assaults for dressing one way or the other. The feminists in Nicaragua set up a Facebook group and also organised public demonstrations.

C) *El Salvador: Real Equality Law*

In June 2009, after twenty consecutive years of being governed by the right wing party ARENA, El Salvador elected President Mauricio Funes, from the left-wing *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)*. Unlike the case of Nicaragua, this has brought a more progressive agenda in terms of gender equity. As a matter of fact, several prominent feminist activists are now leading sections of the gender-equity offices that Funes has opened up in different departments.

It is important to clarify that the feminist movement has different takes on the convenience of the current closeness between the government and the activists. On one hand, it is of course seen as an opportunity, but there are also concerns regarding the autonomy and critical analysis that can be performed when one is so close to power. As Ivonne Argueta states: “there is a general feeling of having a successful alliance, when in some cases no negotiation is possible due to the subordinated nature of the current relationship. Also, the government has declared it is a government of unity, not socialist, which is actually a frequent discourse in right wing tendencies¹⁸.”

In terms of telecommunications, El Salvador had privatised most of its services long before joining the CAFTA, hence the majority of the television networks are owned by corporations whose agenda has to do little with making the voices of women or their realities, visible. The prime time news all have male anchors and consider issues the feminist movement fights for, not worthy of national interest.

The feminist movement has greater access to community radios through which it can position its proposals and disseminate campaign ideas. As in other Central American countries, mobile telephony has broadened internet access for the population, and the presence of multiple mobile companies in a small territory has implied a significant decrease in costs.

One of the challenges for Internet access in El Salvador continues to be capacity building, as ICT literacy is not part of any public education programme. There have been specific initiatives supported by international cooperation, but with a very limited scope and no sustainability in the long term. There is use of ICTs by social movements, but mainly from NGOs or from offices in the urban settings of El Salvador, because access to technology is more difficult in rural regions.

Although the country is small, public transportation is scarce, people cannot move easily from their departments to the capital city. This is worrisome, as the government is progressively shifting services and information to the online space, which in turn excludes a significant part of the

18 Interview with Ivonne Argueta, independent feminist activist from El Salvador, March 2011.

population who does not have access to the Internet.

The feminist movement uses technology for its campaigns and communications, however, it has not necessarily discussed some of the strategic issues behind the use of technologies. Argueta stated that “the possible intervention of email accounts is not a pressing concern for the movement, nobody has had to deal with these issues yet. We know we have to be careful, but we have never spoken about security or how to handle our information. We should.”¹⁹

One of the last campaigns in which the women's movement used ICTs was led by the feminist alliance *Concertación Prudencia Ayala*, to position and disseminate the Real Equality Law.



“Women of yesterday and today DEMAND the approval of the Equality Law”.

Source: www.concertacionfeministaprudenciaayala.org

The *Concertación Prudencia Ayala* used a combination of online and offline tools and strategies for this campaign. They used email to coordinate among different organisations of the country, share documents, draft political stands, which they then published in their websites and through social networks. They organised public demonstrations, attended Congress session on the Equality Law and received support from alliances of Congresswomen from Latin America. They video taped several of these key moments of the campaign, edited and then disseminated them through online spaces²⁰. This is very important, because as mentioned before, traditional media does not necessarily cover such news, hence having images is a powerful tool in documenting the process and it additionally strengthens the movement and creates political pressure. On 25th November, 2010, the Congress of El Salvador voted unanimously in favour of the Real Equality Law.



“Yes: 75, No: 0 Blank: 0. File No 8. Special Integral Law for a Life free of Violence for Women”. Source: snapshot from video, <http://www.youtube.com/v/6wjHYLALVhs>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The videos are available at: <http://www.youtube.com/v/6wjHYLALVhs>, 26 August 2011.

D) *Costa Rica: “Don't label me”*

Costa Rica is a country of contradictions, as it is progressive in some senses, for instance, it has no army and its infant mortality statistics are paired with first world countries. On the other hand it has minimal engagement on issues of sexuality and women's rights. For example, it has no sex education in schools, it is the only country in the Western hemisphere where in vitro fertilisation is completely prohibited and the country's Constitution establishes Catholicism as the official religion of the state.

In February 2010, for the first time in its history, Costa Rica elected a woman, Laura Chinchilla, as President of the country. Sadly, this does not bring with it an advancement for the agenda of women's rights. On the contrary, it implies a setback, since Chinchilla is a conservative, religious person who has publicly declared that she has no communication with the feminist movement and also no interest in giving priority to the sexual rights and reproductive rights issues. This is one of the many reasons why the feminist movement issued a statement²¹ titled: 'She does not represent us', explaining why the newly elected President did not have the movements support.

The population of Costa Rica has high levels of education and since the country only recently privatised telecommunications, there is broad access to technology, both individually and collectively, through cyber cafes and telecentre-type initiatives. The Free and Open Source (FOSS) community has progressively grown in the country and now has the support of public universities, a network of civil society organisations, as well as an upcoming private sector that sells programming and web services based on the open source approach. The FOSS community has also transcended the software aspects and has clear proposals regarding openness, as a human right value. As Caroline Hine, from the *Red de Software Libre* commented: “it's very important to think and make explicit the conditions in which I want to share my knowledge, since we live in an era where even ideas are commercialised every day.”²²

Nevertheless, even though there is a community thinking around strategic social aspects of technology, and there are women within the movement, it does not lead to a feminist analysis of the issue or in the increased presence of feminist activists within such networks. Information society issues are completely absent from the agenda of the feminist movement in Costa Rica. The feminist organisations do not consider the issue a priority, and in some cases, they do not feel that the

21 Letter written by feminist activists available at: <http://www.elpregon.org/v2/costarica/politica/1750-feministas-acuerdan-no-apoyar-a-laura-chinchilla>

22 Interview with Carolina Hine, Red de Software Libre de Costa Rica, April 2011.

discussion spaces within the information society policies have room for them to participate. As Andrea Alvarado stated: “when I attended a governance forum in Rio de Janeiro it was clear that all the power was in the hands of the corporations, and civil society had no capacity to leverage on any issue, the agenda was set by the governments and the large enterprises”²³.

The feminist movement uses ICT tools to articulate its ideas, run campaigns and disseminate their actions. However, there are no reflections regarding the security of the organisations that use these tools. As Hine expressed: “sometimes this has to do with denial, because the risk is real, but if we thought about it every day, probably we would not be able to do our work”.

One of the recent campaigns that combines offline and online spaces was developed by the *Colectiva por el Derecho a Decidir*²⁴ and is called 'Don't put a label on me'. This campaign focuses on how society puts pejorative labels on women that discriminate and reinforce socially imposed roles that they have to fulfil. The campaign had a video and a radio spot as well as a large-format poster that was placed in bus stops in different parts of the country. The motto of the campaign was 'you have the right to make your decisions and I have the right to make mine'. This campaign was launched to balance a negative social environment around the issue of sexual diversity in the country that was facing the possibility of having a national referendum about same-sex marriage. Fortunately, the case was presented at the constitutional court and the proposal was rejected.

The campaign was also reproduced online by regional feminist organisations and in pictures of a recent public demonstration in Nicaragua, there were several signs and posters that used the same colour scheme and image of this poster (to the right) but with a different text message related to the demonstration.



23 Interview with Andrea Alvarado, Feminist Radio, Costa Rica, May 2011.

24 For more information see: www.colectiva-cr.com, 26 August 2011.

4. A feminist perspective on the information society

The Central American feminist movement, as of now, does not play a strategic role within the information society context. There is appropriation and use of ICTs for the different organisational purposes as well as for positioning feminist issues in the public agenda, which is in itself an exercise of citizenship. A combination of younger and older activists has the feminist movement to harness the potential of ICTs. This is achieved through the use of the knowledge and closeness of a younger generation to technology the institutional resources created by older generations.

However, there is still no in depth analysis of the macro-structural implications of the legislation, values and social dynamics relating to these technologies. One can find such discussions among the FOSS networks of Central America, but gender related discussions are still at a very basic level. far from a feminist position, and in some cases, limited to the level of women's participation in technological careers.

It is fundamental for the feminist movement of Central America to analyse the structural aspects of the information society, as it has done for other macro-social areas such as economy or health. In our current society the techno-social paradigm shapes the world we live in and we, as feminists, cannot afford to move naively within this reality as if it does not affect us or the issues we fight for every day. Information society does not affect only those with connectivity, it has consequences for the life of everyone and for the planet as a whole.

To contribute in building a feminist perspective of the information society, it is fundamental to approach the question from an integral perspective of feminism, such as that proposed by Batliwala (2008), that encompasses “the transformation of all social relations of power that oppress, exploit, or marginalise any set of people, women and men, on the basis of their gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, religion, nationality, location, class, caste, or ethnicity”. This implies also economic justice, democratisation of political processes and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

The following seven dimensions are proposed, where feminist perspective can contribute to enrich the information society (IS) policies and initiatives, in order to foster greater gender equity and social justice in the Central American societies. These dimensions are meant as a starting point, an example of the type of issues to be addressed within the information society. It would be of great value to discuss in each country the issues that are particularly relevant according to the national context and identify priority areas for a feminist information society agenda.

(1) *Inclusiveness and diversity*

- Are the IS initiatives and policies designed taking into account the diversity of needs and capacities of the country's population?
- Do the IS initiatives and policies contribute to greater citizenship and participation of socially marginalised groups?
- Are there systematic initiatives and programs to strengthen and increase the agency of these marginalised groups within the information society?

(2) *Gender roles*

- Are the IS initiatives and policies contributing to greater flexibility in the social roles traditionally assigned to men and women?
- Are there national policies or initiatives to increase the participation of women in all professional spheres and decision making positions within the country's information society ecology?
- Do the online social media initiatives contribute to ensuring a voice for women's organisations and feminist issues as part of the public agenda?

(3) *Democratisation*

- Do the IS initiatives and policies of the country enable less vertical and more horizontal, participatory and democratic power and decision-making structures?
- Are there participatory mechanisms where the different sectors (government, civil society, academia, private sector) can discuss and decide on national IS policies?
- Do individual women and feminist organisations have the enabling conditions necessary to fully participate in these mechanisms?

(4) *Environmental sustainability*

- Do the country's IS policies and initiatives take into account the carbon footprint produced by the production and use of ICTs?
- Are there specific initiatives to promote renewable energy and handling of electronic waste?

(5) *Openness*

- Do the country's IS policies and initiatives promote a perspective of open knowledge and public goods?
- Are there specific initiatives or regulations to guarantee technological neutrality and promote the use of free and open source software?

(6) *Economic fairness*

- Does the country have policies and initiatives to redistribute the economic benefits of the information society among the population?
- Are there specific measures to enable women and other marginalised groups to participate in the information economy under equitable conditions?

(7) *Non-violence*

- Are there specific IS policies and initiatives to fight violence against women and other marginalised groups?
- Does the legislation of the country identify and punish the use of ICTs to exert violence against women and/or other marginalised groups?
- Are there systematic mechanisms to protect people's privacy and guarantee online security for the population in general, and for human rights activists in particular?

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