Bringing the local and intimate to the national and institutional

Using ICTs for legislative advocacy for reproductive health

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Executive summary

This feminist action research project attempted to provide a platform, through an online magazine, for the experiences, needs, desires and analysis of marginalised women, men and youth. The hope was that through this project, the stories and accounts of those community members most in need of sexual and reproductive health services and rights (SRHR) could influence lawmakers both directly and through public opinion, and lead into the passing of a reproductive health law.

Using feminist research methodology the project attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Can community groups and individuals in marginalised communities use ICTs from within feminist and social movement paradigms that are based on participation and social justice that allows for the privileging of the realities and needs of marginalised youth, women and men?

2. Can a development of an online magazine within this paradigm result in good practices and lessons learned on the process of constructing and running such a magazine?

3. Does the technology itself have a dialectical effect in shaping the content generated?

The research showed that ICTs can be used to reflect the realities and aspirations of women and youth in poor communities, and these realities and aspirations can in turn provide a rationale for passing a legislation that assures their access to reproductive health services. It also reveals that disadvantaged women and youth can take control of ICTs and become empowered in the process. However, these outcomes were true only at the micro-level of the online magazine that the participants published. It appears that their ability to bring their realities and opinions to a broader public though the use of ICTs remains hampered by more powerful forces that control the Internet, mainstream media and the national level discussions about the reproductive health bill.

Background

This feminist action research project attempted to provide a platform, through an online magazine, for the experiences, needs, desires and analysis of marginalised women, men and youth. The hope was that through this project, the stories and accounts of those community members most in need of sexual and reproductive health services and rights (SRHR) could influence lawmakers both directly and through public opinion, and lead to the passing of a reproductive health law.

Women's groups in the Philippines are in their 12th year of advocacy for the passage of a reproductive health (RH) bill. This proposed law seeks to protect the reproductive rights of women who continue to suffer massive violations in the form of lack of access to adequate maternal care, sexuality education, contraceptives, protection from violence against women, the treatment of infertility and malignancies, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, among others. Apart form the lack of due diligence on the part of the Philippine government to provide the funding as well as facilities and trained personnel to provide these services, there have been glaring instances of outright violations of women's reproductive and sexual rights, such as bans by local governments of certain cities and provinces on the sale or distribution of modern contraceptives (UN-CSW, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

When reproductive rights advocates protest these violations, they are met with the argument that because reproductive health services have been decentralised and put under the control of local government units (LGU), there can be no action taken by the national government to remedy the situation. Furthermore, the previous administration's national policy was to promote mainly natural family planning[1]. Similarly, violations by individual health practitioners or institutions (such as the refusal of hospitals run by the Catholic Church to provide any form of post-abortion care) cannot be punished because of the lack of legislation. Additionally, attempts to influence LGUs to provide reproductive health services has led to patchy victories against a backdrop of neglect. Gains may also be reversed when a more hostile set of officials come to power (Arrow, 2010; *Likhaan*, 2009).

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[1] Speaking of its mandate, the Philippine Population Commission notes: "On October 10, 2006, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo issued guidelines and directive for the DOH, POPCOM, and local government units to take full charge of the implementation of the Responsible Parenthood and Family Planning Program. The Responsible Parenthood and Natural Family Planning Program's <u>primary policy objective is to promote natural family planning,</u> birth spacing (three years birth spacing) and breastfeeding which are good for the health of the mother, child, family, and community. <u>While LGUs can promote artificial family planning because of local autonomy, the national government advocates natural family planning</u> (underscoring mine)." <u>http://www.popcom.gov.ph/about_us/index.html</u> Accessed January 3, 2012.

It is because of these experiences that women's groups began their advocacy for an enabling law that would mandate the national government and LGUs to provide reproductive health services and punish violations of reproductive rights.

From the beginning, the major opposition has come from the Roman Catholic Church, specifically its hierarchy, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)[2]. Apart from mobilising priests, nuns and its employees, the Church also works with its allied lay organisations.

Initially public support for this legislation was minimal and the proposed legislation was easily defeated at the committee level. However, the situation has changed over time. According to some reliable surveys, there is now broad public support for the proposed legislation.(SWS, 2011)[3]. The legislation would have passed through the House of Representatives of the previous Philippine Congress which adjourned on June 30, 2010, but as a result of opposition forces preventing it coming to a vote, the legislation was defeated. While the presence of a considerable number of first-term Congress Members in the current 15th Congress presents a challenge, advocates remain optimistic that the refiled bill will finally pass as long as advocacy efforts are maintained and amplified.

Nonetheless the Church's opposition remains formidable. New, modern battlegrounds for these conflicting stands are being set up to broaden support bases and gain popularity. The Catholic Church and its allied lay organisations are adopting new ICT strategies, particularly through the use of popular social networking sites in its propaganda against the RH bill's passage.

One of the factors for the turn-about in support for the legislation from both the public and the legislators has been the consistent advocacy efforts of a large number of civil society organisations. Most notable among these is the alliance called the Reproductive Health Advocacy Network (RHAN). *Likhaan*, Center for Women's Health, was the convener and first secretariat of this coalition and has served again as its secretariat.

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2   The CBCP made its first definitive statements on population control family planning and guidelines for Catholic hospitals regarding contraceptives in the 1970s. It did not however issue any more pastoral statements during the decade of the 80s. The decade of the 1990s and he first decade of the 21st century provides a sharp contrast with the Church releasing 4 pastoral letters against contraception and abortion in 1990 including the first of a series of pastoral letters to be read in all pulpits of the country. It issued its firt specific pastoral letter against the reproductive health bill, House Bill 4110 in 2003. In 2009 in issued a pastoral letter against House Bill 5043. As of this writing the CBCP has not posted the pastoral letters for 2010 and 2011 (http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/index.html . Accessed January 3, 2012) but the current struggle has increased the sermons and letters read in all pulpits exponentially.

3   Second Quarter 2011 SWS shows 82% say family planning method is a personal choice and 73% want information legal methods available from government.

Likhaan[4] brings its particular strengths to RHAN and the advocacy for reproductive health policies and programs. *Likhaan* works in seven urban and rural poor communities helping to put together community level initiatives that include the provision of reproductive health services. It attempts to link these local initiatives to broader programme and policy initiatives and campaigns. While bringing community perspectives into the formulation of proposed programmes and policies, *Likhaan's* work also brings marginalised women to the policy arena through their direct involvement in the policy formulation process.

In the case of the reproductive health bill for example, *Likhaan*, along with RHAN, has helped to shape the proposed legislation by providing technical support for the bill's main authors. Through press releases, press conferences, novels, information sheets and other materials, *Likhaan* has highlighted the realities of poor women and their families as a way of showing the public that reproductive health is necessary to women's health and dignity as well as the country's over-all development. More importantly, *Likhaan* community activists have been the backbone of mobilisations for hearings in the Philippine Congress whether this be at the various committees or in the plenary sessions.

Despite this, commentators have noted that the realities and voices of poor women continue to be a downplayed in the debates. While this is more greatly noticed in the arguments of those who oppose the bill, advocates themselves feel the need to highlight these women's stories (Torrevillas, 2008).

In the course of its advocacy around the reproductive health bill, *Likhaan* has developed an informed and committed set of leaders and a number of activists from its grassroots communities. These women, youth and men continue to exercise their rights as citizens by directly intervening in the law-making process in order to put in place a law that they see as crucial to their well-being.

The idea of asking these activists to write for the online magazine responds to the expressed need to bring the realities of the poor, especially the women and their families, into the public debate.

Filipino Internet use has steadily increased within the last 10 years, according to the data compiled by Internet World Stats (2010). From a minute portion of 2.6% or 2 million out of a population of 70 million in 2000, the Internet user population has grown to 29.7% in 2010 or about 29.7 million out of the estimated 100 million Filipinos, based from statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (2010).

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4   See http://www.likhaan.org/

Consistent with this data is the National Telecommunications Commission's report (2010) which noted an increase in Internet service provider (ISP) subscribers. From 2001, with only 500,000 ISP subscribers, it jumped to 2.5 million in 2007, a number mostly from the higher income brackets, classes A, B and C.[5] While the number of home Internet users has been increasing per year, their number only comprise 31% of the Internet user population.

Sixty-nine percent of Internet surfers use Internet cafés, according to the Yahoo!-AGB Nielsen survey conducted in the last quarter of 2008. Jay Bautista, AGB Nielsen Company Executive Director for Media, said that majority of the people in the D and E socio-economic classes favour Internet cafés because of the relatively cheap access rates, averaging from 10-15 pesos an hour. Metro Manila, where the activists live, was identified as having the highest Internet access with 40%.

According to the same survey by Yahoo!-Nielsen, there is an increasing number of Filipinos who are using their mobile phones to surf the Internet. Around 1.7 million or 5% of the 29.7% user population are accessing the Internet through cellular phones. The results are consistent with the fact that according to the various surveys on SMS usage, the country remains as the SMS capital of the world, with half a billion text messages coursing through the network traffic per day. The National Telecommunications Commission listed 57 million cellular mobile telephone service (CMTS) subscribers in its 2007 report. SMS technology is the most popular if not the most utilised ICT in the country, and access to this service spans through the different social classes. Other than CMTS subscribers connecting to the Internet, the use of SMS allows public access to various services, including mobile banking, as well as instant access to various government agencies. Take, for example, the Civil Service Commission's (CSC) project called TXTCSC that enables citizens to complain, give observations and suggestions, or inquire with the Commission. The Land Transportation Office (LTO) has a similar service where subscribers can send inquiries and receive details regarding vehicle registration and driver licenses.

SMS technology also has evolved as a political participatory tool for citizens. The national election of 2010 for instance, was an event that maximised the potential of SMS utilised by citizen journalists. The project called WOWW (Watch Out When Women) Vote spearheaded by the UP Centre for Women's Studies and the UP College of Law for the first automated elections in the Philippines, utilised SMS technology for citizen journalism. People from target communities sent text messages of reports,

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5   In the Philippines, citizens are divided into classes A-E based on their socio-economic status, i.e. their income and their assets.

complaints and observations regarding their election experiences. Similarly, nationwide news organisations tapped the technology for citizen reporting.

In 2010, the Philippines ranked first in the Asia-Pacific region for having the highest social networking reach and engagement with 90.3% of its whole web population visiting a popular social networking site (ABS-CBN, 2010). Facebook, which remains as the country's most visited website, gets every Filipino visitor staying for about 5.5 hours per visit for an average of 26 times in a month according to the comScore World Metrix service data as of February 2010. A similar listing generated by Google, also reveals Facebook leading in the Philippines, averaging 10 million users as of September 2010, trailed by two other social networking sites, Friendster.com and Tagged.com (Philippine Internet Review, 2010).

The action research team set up an online magazine hosted by the website of *Likhaan*. By hosting the magazine on the *Likhaan* website, the team hoped to explore how digital technology can facilitate (or hinder) the active citizenship of *Likhaan* activists in their engagement with the 15th Congress within the context of the struggle to pass a law that mandates access to reproductive health services.

The impetus towards engaging in this research was that it allowed us to pose several intriguing questions about gender, the Internet and citizenship. We wanted to explore what would happen when those who are on the 'have-nots' side of the digital divide—young people and women from poor communities – are given access to ICTs and the Internet. We believe our research project posed this question in a relevant and non-essentialist way. These young people and women are clearly political actors who are working towards a specific political goal—the passage of reproductive health law. Their very engagement in legislative advocacy integrates questions about citizenship particularly around issues of representation and accountability as well as active engagement in governance. In addition, these activists are aware of the larger frame of SRHR. Thus, rights claiming as a form of citizenship, is intrinsic to the political activity being supported. We hoped that the research could bring out some insight into how the assertion of rights by activists from grass-roots communities can affect and be affected by a discourse dominated by the powerful Catholic Church and the mainstream news media outlets who use very different discursive strategies.

It is important to note that from the beginning of this research project, the content of the online magazines had been decided by the research team. Political assessments by RHAN had showed that the stories of those truly in need of reproductive and sexual health services were not entering into the

national discourse via print, broadcast or online media, through online social networking, or even in the debates in the legislature. It was this gap that we hoped to fill through the stories of the activists. Nonetheless, the decision in terms of the content was consistent with feminist methodological principles, because the writers were being asked to reflect on grounded realities as a way of validating the importance of these stories (Lather, 1991). A second question posed therefore was not what kind of content would be generated, but whether the content generated would have some impact on the ongoing debates and governance processes. Do the stories get read? Do they influence other media? Do they help mobilise others? Can IT be used to bridge the intimate and the local to the national and institutional, and in what way?

A related question is how (if at all) ICTs re-shape the formulation of the advocacy and its content. At the start we were open to several outcomes: that the proposed 'online magazine' would take a different form because of the local, intimate and non-professional character of the writers and their stories; that the use of IT tools would intimidate and stifle the creativity of the activists; or that both effects would occur simultaneously.

Lastly, the action research was interested in the change in the activists themselves. As an integral part of its methodological commitment to feminist research, the project sought to ensure the empowerment of the youth and women activists who participated in the project (Reid, 2004).

Research project

A)   Objectives and research questions

General Objective: Explore how digital technologies, mainly online tools, can be used to bring the realities of grass-roots communities into the public policy discourse that will arise out of the reproductive health bill.

Specific Objectives:

- To document the process by which grass-roots activists make use of online tools as an additional platform for advocacy for reproductive health concerns of the community.

- To document the assessment of the community based activists regarding their use of the technology.

Research questions:

- Can community groups and individuals in marginalised communities use IT from within feminist and social movement paradigms that are based on participation and social justice that allows for the priviledging of the realities and needs of marginalised youth, women and men?

- Can a development of an online magazine within this paradigm change result in good practices and lessons learned on the process of constructing and running such a magazine?

- Does the technology itself have a dialectical effect in shaping the content generated?

B)   Methodology

Feminist Research Methodology

Feminist research methodology is defined in this action research as a collection of methods guided by a feminist perspective (Reinharz, 1992). The research is also feminist, in that it aims to contribute to social change for women.

Our perspective is captured further by the below summary as presented by Reid (2004):

> a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works toward inclusion, participation, action, and social change while confronting the

underlying assumptions the researcher brings into the research process. Feminist action researchers facilitate building knowledge to change the conditions of women's lives, both individually and collectively, while reconstructing conceptions of power so that power can be used in a responsible manner (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). Feminist action research is a tool, not a panacea, that involves a particular way of looking at the world and thinking about research and research participants (Maguire, 1987). Since many poor women are excluded from social processes and their communities, open and flexible theory-building grounded in a body of empirical work ceaselessly confronted with, and respectful of, women's day to day experiences is needed (Lather, 1991).

Action Component

The action component of this research involved the recruitment and training of community-based activists who generated stories grounded in the everyday realities of their communities that underlined the need of marginalised women, men and youth for reproductive heath services. These stories were featured in a website and other social networking sites as means to augment ongoing advocacy for the passage of a reproductive health law.

The community journalists were selected by the following criteria: grasp on the issues of community in reproductive health, members of *Likhaan*, willingness to be trained in journalism, ability to allocate time to write articles and cover events, and willingness to be part of the research.

Application form with sets of questions related to sexual and reproductive health was distributed among members of the organisation. After the screening of applicants, the community coordinator of the research team went to the community and interview the applicants. Through the interviews, the community coordinator was able to get the applicants' personal views on issues such as teenage pregnancy, contraception, gender and the use of media for communication.

The final list of trainees for the community journalism was generated after consultations with the community health workers and organisers of *Likhaan*.

Methods

1. A discourse analysis of website content was done using Estrada-Claudio's (2002) method with the analysis revolving around the following questions:

1.1 What is the text trying to say in terms of several levels of meaning? Particularly:

- the obvious or manifest meaning;

- the latent meanings, i.e. meanings which may not be stated in the words and sentences but are

    implied;

- the global meanings, i.e. meanings that emerge when we take into consideration other systems that determine meanings such as societal norms;

1.2 What is the form of subjectivity (emotional and mental state) that the text is dictating to the reader? The research team specifically looked at differing subjectivities dictated for men and women;

1.3 What are the means/methods by which each text claims truth? To claim truth texts exercise certain strategies of power or 'discourse strategies'.

2. Documentation of the meetings of the research team in order to arrive at a descriptive narration of the plans and activities undertaken, including obstacles and solutions, facilitating factors and insights on process.

3. Quantitative analysis of the website using Google Analytics, number of stories published, type of stories—photo essays, opinions, features.

4. A final focus group discussion with the research team and a few selected activists to garner the their reflections regarding the hypothesis/questions of the research.

Limitations

The research cannot undertake a full process documentation nor is it possible to do an impact evaluation of the website.

C)   Findings/Results

Publication and articles

1   Quantitative data

1. Number of articles and authors

Overall the research undertook 3 training sessions, with 11 trainees from 4 urban poor communities. It held 9 planning meetings with the writer-activists and 9 'press work' sessions where activists worked in a computer lab provided by the research project. Of the 11 trainees, 3 dropped out of the research.

The publishing process involved the submission of articles to 2 editors of the project who then edited the texts and requested revisions as required. Once these revisions were made to the satisfaction of the editors, the articles were published online.

As a form of giving value to the work of women, which often gets dismissed or assumed to be given for free, writers received a token fee of 1000 Philippine pesos for each published article.

During the course of the project, 45 articles and stories were generated of which 24 (written in Filipino) were eventually printed online.

All articles were originally written in Filipino. As the project was attempting to bring these stories to the attention of lawmakers and other influential people, the research team attempted to translate these stories into English. However, due to the lack of a budget for translators, volunteers were only able to translate 7 into English, namely[6]:

- Lashes from EO-003: the Family Planning Ban in Manila

- When Will the Catholic Church Face Reality?

- A Perspective from the Community Activists Writing Workshop

- Dr. Esperanza Cabral: New Idol for the Youth

- Pass the RH Bill Now!

- Public Hearings for the RH Bill Completed

- Community Activists Trained in IT

The stories generated (both published and unpublished) were classified as follows:

Published:

- News: 3

- Features: 17

- Photo essays: 2

- Blogs/Opinion columns/ letter : 2

Not Published:

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6   See http://www.likhaan.org/content/community-voices

- News: 4

- Features: 11

- Photo essays: 1

- Blogs/Opinion columns/ letter : 6

Authorship of the published articles were distributed as follows:

Author	Number of Articles
Lorena	3
Mark	4
Dioshiel	4
Khaila	2
Emma	3
Bernice	2
Sheina	1
Kiko	3
Guy	1

2. Google Analytics

Google Analytics can count views of a web page by each unique computer, not person. In situations where multiple people share access to computers (e.g., Internet café or school computers), unique views tend to undercount the number of people who have accessed a page. Page views also do not count the number of "pass-on" readers through other mechanisms like Facebook postings. In addition, *Likhaan's* website configuration was purposely set not to count access done by authors themselves, so that the data was more reliable as an indicator of traffic to the site.

With the above caveats, the project's Google Analytics data (see Annex 1) for the period Dec 2010 to Dec 2011 show that Filipino articles were viewed a total of 3,290 times, and English translations a total of 964 times, or a total of 4,254 times for all articles. After correcting for mis-classifications (i.e., a single article was pegged at two URLs, probably due to midstream changes in article titles), the data also show that each Filipino article got an average of 142 views and English translations 138. The page view numbers are modest to low, and given the fact that the project's writers, articles and website section are all quite new, the project needs further promotion, regularity of releases to generate regular readership, and improvements both in content and look.

2   Discourse analysis

1. Overt content/meanings

The following are the articles, translated titles and a brief summary of the content:

Title	Title in English	Brief summary
Bukas na Liham kay Rep. Robes Hinggil sa RH Bill	Open Letter to Rep. Robes on the RH Bill	A letter by the President of the Organisation of the Free Women of Towerville asking their Representative to vote for the RH Bill.
Pagkain ng sisiw para sa iba, pagkain na para sa mga anak niya	Food for chickens is a meal for her children	The story of Aling Linda, who feeds her 4 children by begging stores to allow her to pick up rice grains spilled on their floors.
Kabataan, May "Say" Ka!	Youth, You have a say.	A report on youth issues addressed by the RH bill, youth organising and participation in the struggle to pass the bill. Article includes photographs of youth activities.
Komunidad na Malusog at Maunlad: ang Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihan sa Towerville	A Healthy and Progressive Community: The Organisation of Free Women in Towerville	A report on the work of SMKT, a women's health organisation and its work and services in Towerville, an urban poor community. Article includes photographs of SMKT activities.

Bata, Bata... Ano ang Iyong Ginagawa?	Child, child, what are you doing?	Opinion piece on how the provision of contraceptives as mandated in the RH bill can be of benefit of poorer families.
Hagupit ng EO-003, ang Family Planning Ban sa Maynila	Lashes from EO-003: the Family Planning Ban in Manila	Personal recounting of Emma, one of the petitioners to the Supreme Court asking it to rescind the Executive Order banning contraceptives in the city of Manila.
Kuryosidad ng Kabataan, Habang Buhay na Responsibilidad ang Kinahantungan	Youth curiosity can lead to a life-long burden.	The story of Lhyn, 19 years old, a member of a youth organisation working on SRHR who got pregnant when she was 15.
Kinabukasan Para Sa Kabataan	A Future for the Youth	Photos with text. Conditions in poor communities that young people have to deal with and their participation in the advocacy for the RH Bill.
Young Mama	Young Mama	The stories of Ellaine, 14, and Catherine, 18, both pregnant and Robelyn, 16, who had just given birth. Stories accompanied by pictures of the women.
Ang Kababaihan sa Maynila	The Women in Manila	Story on the effects on women and their family of the total ban on contraceptives in Manila.
Responsableng Pagpapamilya: Paano kaming mga Bakla?	Responsible Parenthood? But what about us gays?	The story of Mark highlighting good practices of youth and women organisations that avoid a hetero-sexist approach to the provision of sexual and reproductive health services to all sectors.
Naging Responsableng	She became a responsible	The story of a woman who took control of her

Magulang Dahil sa Kaalamang RH	parent because of her knowledge of RH.	fertility by seeking out reproductive health services and informing herself on these issues. The story has photographs of the woman, her home, and her children.
Kailan ba Haharapin ng Simbahang Katoliko ang Katotohanan?	When Will the Catholic Church Face Reality?	The reporter, Bernice, writes about her unintended debate with a catechist over the RH Bill when she attended a meeting on behalf of her mother to discuss the first communion of a younger sibling.
Bahay na ba 'to?	Is this really a house?	Photo essay showing decrepit and crowded living conditions in the community. Text talks of how families struggle with the overcrowding and poverty.
1,500 Nag-rally para sa RH, Naitulak ang Panukala na Pumasa sa Appropriations Committee	1,500 Rally for RH, Push the Bill Past the Appropriations Committee	Article talks of the rally and proceedings in the House of Representatives as the RH Bill hurdles another committee vote.
Ang mga Ilaw ng Tahanan	The Light of the Home	Photos and text showing mothers lining up in long queues to access free contraceptive services given by Likhaan in the City of Manila.
Sino'ng Banal?	Who is Holy?	Discusses abortion prevention through contraceptive access and sexuality education. The author argues further that being non-judgemental of women seeking abortions is a better expression of her Catholic faith.

Nagbigay na ng Buhay, pati Sariling Kalusugan Isasakripisyo?	Must I give my own life in order to give life?	About the life and views of Aling Vicky, an ordinary citizen who favours the RH Bill.
Kwento Ko 'to	This is my story.	Story of a young woman who became active in a youth organisation. She admits to having pre-marital sex but is proud that she uses contraceptives to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. Her experiences illustrate the correctness of the RH bills approach to adolescent sexuality.
Isang Perspektibo sa Community Activists Writing Workshop	A Perspective from the Community Activists Writing Workshop	A participant reflects on her experience after the series of trainings preparing them to write for the online magazine.
Dr. Esperanza Cabral: Bagong Idolo ng mga Kabataan	Dr. Esperanza Cabral: New Idol for the Youth	Article talks about why the youth idolise Dr. Esperanza Cabral a former Secretary of Health and RH advocate.
RH Bill: Ipasa na! NOW na!	Pass the RH Bill Now!	Manifesto of the Youth Federation PILAKK calling for immediate passage of the RH Bill.
RH Bill: Natapos na sa Committee Public Hearing	Public Hearings for the RH Bill Completed	News report on the culmination of public hearings on the RH Bill by the Committee on Population and Family Relations.
Mga Aktibista Nag-training sa IT	Community Activists Trained in IT	Report on the training for community activists.

2. Underlying meanings

The over-all trend of the articles is towards personal and grounded knowledge. Only 8 of the published

stories could be classified as having some form of reportage of facts regarding events (e.g. the passage of the RH bill out of a house committee) or documentation of community conditions (e.g. crowded and decrepit housing conditions) or community activities (e.g. a free clinic in Manila provided by *Likhaan*).

Only three of these eight stories did not refer to a personal situation or opinion, thus taking the form of a traditional news report. These are: Community Activists Trained in IT; 1,500 Rally for RH, Push the Bill Past the Appropriations Committee; Public Hearings for the RH Bill Completed.

Of the 21 articles which involved some form of personal reference, 14 included personal stories. Half of these, or seven stories, were about the writers themselves who revealed details such as their being gay or their having engaged in sex with someone to whom they were not married.

The photographs can be divided into 2 major types: pictures of poor community and home conditions and pictures of organisational activities such as rallies, pickets, meetings, clinics. A few portraits are included in the articles, but the subjects are often seen in their small homes or in the poor conditions of the community.

It is pertinent that the engagement into the intimate and grounded was clearly a preference of the activists themselves. Initial 'press work meetings' were run in a more traditional manner where the editors or the activists would assign themselves stories that seemed valuable in relation to national events, on the status of the RH bill or what opinion makers might find worth or interesting, after discussions and briefings. This method was changed because the writers found assigned articles difficult to write. Some would then give up and be unable to submit anything or end up writing something of their own choice.

Overall, the content focused on the sexual, reproductive and intimate aspects of people's lives. Topics were related to the sphere of social reproduction such as the home, relationships, hopes for well-being, economic or otherwise, and the need for social services like health and education.

3. Truth claims

A view of the articles in their location on the *Likhaan* website reveals that they appear as similar to any online publication or set of articles. The articles are linked under the "community voices" box on the home page of the organisational website. While many articles were photo essays or contained a number of photographs, formatting and layout were not unusual for each article compared to the structure of

other online journals and magazines. In this sense, there is some form of claim that the articles are somewhat similar to other forms of online journalism and publication.

Likhaan
center for women's health inc.
Helping women help themselves, their families and communities
—Reproductive health —Family planning —Community health

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By: Walden Bello • Inquirer.net
One wishes that one could characterize the debate as a laudable exercise in democracy. It has become, instead, an exercise on how to use parliamentary procedures to derail democracy. The same questions have been repeatedly raised by the anti-RH interpellators, and it has become increasingly clear that, not having the votes to prevent the passage of the bill in the House, they have resorted to the equivalent of a filibuster to delay the bill from coming to a vote on the floor. ...

The debate in the House reminds this writer, a participant in the House debate, of the famous "Scopes Monkey Trial" in Tennessee in 1925, where a schoolteacher named John Scopes was prosecuted for teaching the theory of evolution. The trial evolved into a battle between fundamentalism and reason, with the controversial three-time Democratic candidate for president William Jennings Bryan leading the prosecution and the famed defense lawyer Clarence Darrow heading up the defense. (The conflict was memorably captured in the film Inherit the Wind, with Frederic March playing Bryan and Spencer Tracy acting as Darrow.)

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Primer on Legal Issues in Reproductive Rights by Four UP Law Professors
Posted Fri, 12/09/2011
Like 70

Four professors from the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Law recently released a "Primer on Legal Issues in Reproductive Rights." The four are Raul C. Pangalangan, Elizabeth Aguiling-Pangalangan, Herminio Harry L. Roque, Jr. and Florin T. Hilbay. The primer tackles some of the most pressing and controversial legal issues in RH in a direct and simple question-and-answer format, conveniently divided into four areas: constitutional law, family law including women's and children's rights, international law, and the internationally protected right to health. Follow this link to read or download the primer.

Here are some excerpts to whet your appetite:

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RHAN Never Pays RH Rally Participants
Posted Fri, 12/02/2011
Like 124

The news report by Christian V. Esguerra (PDI, 2 December 2011) insinuated that the Reproductive Health Advocacy Network (RHAN) asked for funds to pay people to attend pro-RH rallies. This is totally false.

If, as reported by Esguerra, "each participant was supposed to receive P350", then 1.75 million pesos "to organize a rally of 'at least 5,000 people'" would fall too short since legitimate rally expenses are sizeable: whole-day rent of jeepneys, food and water for at least two meals per participant, sound system, streamers and placards. Any unbiased reporter would easily have established that payments for these expenses are not "received" by participants but are paid directly to jeepney drivers and suppliers of food and other rally materials.

Read more   915 reads

Smaller families planned
Posted Thu, 11/24/2011
Like 1

By Manini Sheker • The Guardian
The Philippines has a history of antipathy to contraception and a growing number of street children but, with the population expected to double over 30 years, attitudes are changing.

As dusk descends, the alleyways of Paradise, at the northern edge of Manila, are filled with the scattered laughter of street urchins, begging for money and rifling through the rubbish for scraps to ease their hunger.

"Paradise is a factory for [producing] children," says 37-year-old midwife Anna Miranda. "Their parents can no longer care for them."

Add new comment   329 reads

Occupy for RH
Posted Sun, 11/20/2011
Like 3

OCCUPY FOR R

It has been ten years since the first RH Bill, and after countless debates and delays we are no closer to a vote. The democratic process has stalled at the hands of time-wasting legislators and bullying bishops.

With mounting frustration we remind our public servants that for every day they delay the vote, Filipino families around the country lose their mothers. The time for delay is over. The time for a vote is now.

1 comment   534 reads

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ... next › last »

One difference that can be noted compared to other online magazines, however, is that articles, instead of being bylined, are usually credited at the end of the article to a name or nickname in this format: "--Emma".

Two of the articles used the more collective voice of an organisation. "Open Letter to Rep. Robes on the RH Bill" is signed by the President of the Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihan ng Towerville. "Pass the RH Bill, Now!" is an official statement by the youth and women's federation PILAKK.

However, consistent with the nature of sexuality and reproduction, most of the claims to truth of the articles revolved around the personal testimony of the interviewees, the writers themselves or the pictures chosen which revealed the poverty and dire living conditions of the authors themselves.

4. Subjectivity

The subjectivity constructed by the stories often blurs the line between the reader and the writer. Very often the stories refer to 'we youth' or 'we women' or 'we members of a poor community'.

There were nonetheless many descriptions of people to whom events happened, often as unwilling victims. When these forms of subjectivity are evoked, the dichotomy between reader and reporter is also often instantiated. This can be seen, for example, in the article "Lashes from EO-003: the Family Planning Ban in Manila,":

The lashes delivered by Executive Order 003 (EO-003) of former Mayor Atienza in 2000 are severe. Not only was our freedom to decide for our families taken away from us. Even our hope of having our children finish school was stolen because their numbers doubled. Because artificial family planning was banned, we suffered a great deal with having to raise 8–13 children. Bear in mind that our husbands have no jobs.

But, all articles which refer to victimisation also refer to the agency of those victimised in seeking justice. In the same article cited above, Emma, the author states, "We filed at the Court of Appeals (CA) last January 2008 a petition to declare EO-003 as against the Constitution."

Indeed both within the articles and across articles, the subject position ascribed to persons is often one of an active agent seeking social change. Where the person interviewed or written about is not a person involved in the social movement for SRHR, the persons are shown as reflecting on their own

experiences that lead them to actively support the RH Bill ("Must I give my own life in order to give life?") or express views that underscore the correctness of some provision of the bill ("Young Mama").

Focused Group Discussion (FGD)/Notes from documentation of meetings

The FGD was conducted on October 2, 2011. It was attended by all project staff and all the trained community activists, including those who dropped out of the project.

The discussion began with the reasons/difficulties that caused some activists to drop out and others to write less than they wished. Most cited the need to attend to earning a living as the main reason for dropping out. One participant noted that she began the project as a jobless person and when she finally got a job, which she really needed, she could no longer put in the time to write. Another activist said that when she went back to school, she found less time to write. Another activist talked about her multiple burdens as a wife and mother who needed to supplement her husband's irregular earnings. One activist noted that she was unfamiliar with the computer and the Internet, and while the project had helped her gain skills, she was still slow compared to those who had more skills. One participant had reported that she had given birth (she was pregnant during the training) and this put an end to her participation.

The activists also stated their struggles with the creative process itself. Mac, one of the participants, notes, "Ang hirap sumulat ng kung anu-ano ba ang papansinin ng mga tao, at paano kukuha ng atensyon sa kwento. (*It is difficult to write on a variety of topics and to try to write on what people find interesting and also to write in a way that would grab the reader's attention.*)"

Earlier discussions revealed other difficulties such as the slow Internet connections in Internet cafés, which made uploading and submission of articles difficult. The longer upload times also meant higher fees at the café. Others cited that Internet cafés were not accessible enough so that they preferred to just go to the *Likhaan* office and submit their articles from there. Those who could access cafés found them unsuitable for writing, because they were meant more for gaming and often were dark, noisy, and inhabited by young boys.

The absence of computers at home was very much a topic of both the FGD and the team meetings. One woman said that she would write up her articles by hand and then type them up when she got to a

computer. Interestingly, another woman said that she wrote by hand because she was unfamiliar with typing on a key board and the other activists had to input her handwritten work for her.

The lack of access to computers often led to a lot of humour about the abuse of (and addiction to) the computer laboratory of the University of the Philippines Centre for Women's Studies which was the venue for press work and meetings.[7] Aside from spending long hours at the lab catching up on their writing, the activists admitted spending time to do social networking and surfing whether these were related to the advocacy for the bill or not.

Both in the FGD and during meetings, the activists shared stories of helping each other out. Sheina talks about her collaboration with Lorena: "Ako naman ay may advantage sa computer naseshare ko yung kaalaman ko sa computer samantalanag nabibigyan nya ako ng idea... (*I have the advantage on the computer so I share my knowledge about computers while she gives me ideas..*)" In response, Lorena notes that this partnership helped her improve her computer skills.

In general all the activists found the project 'empowering'. They expressed pride in themselves because many of them had never written formally and none had ever been published before. Most of the activists felt that their computer and ICT literacy and skills had been enhanced to a large degree. The elder women, 3 in the group, recalled how they had never really encountered a computer before they were trained by the project.

The mere process of publication was empowering for the activists. They talked about the affirmation and pride once their articles were published and how they asked all their friend, relatives and organisation co-members to read their work. While meagre, they appreciated the payment they received for each article published. They appreciated the pay because it allowed them to supplement low family incomes, but even more so in that this was a sign that their efforts, their creativity and their insights were valued.

Dioshel sums up the relative value of psychic gains against the material ones: "Pangalawa na lang yung bonus, yung monetary. Ang talagang premyo ay makita mong nababasa yung experiences sa community mo. (*The bonus is secondary, the monetary. The real prize is to see the experiences of your community being read by others.*)" Dioshel goes on to say that she did not want to spend her first pay, but she wanted to frame it instead.

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7   Use of the lab was given for free by the Centre under a cooperation agreement with *Likhaan* and the Citigen research project.

Comments were made about the "bottleneck" of waiting for the editors. The reasons for this were explained (see further explanations in the Discussion section below). At this point the activists expressed appreciation for the efforts the editors took with the editing. Dioshiel notes, "Gusto ko yung ginagawa ni Tito Jun na may red para at least ay alam kung mali. Nababalikan ko. (*I like what Jun does, highlighting his comments in red. I know where I have made mistakes. And I am able to review these errors.*)"

Both activists and researchers expressed their deeper appreciation of the need for sexual and reproductive rights as a result of their involvement in the project. The community activists felt they grasped or understood even more deeply the reality of their communities and their own situations.

Dioshel notes, "Hindi maaalis na mainvolve ka sa kwento na sinusulat mo. Ako nararamdaman ko yung sinusulat ko para maramdaman din ng babasa.(*You can't avoid becoming involved in the story you are writing. I make myself feel what I am writing so that the reader can also feel for the story.*)"

Khaila adds, "..opinion yung unang sinulat ko kaya madali na.. kung paano ba yung magiging relasyon mo sa iinterbyuhin, habang nagiinterview ka ay napapalalim din yung inyong pagtingin. (*I first wrote an opinion piece so that was easy..but what about my relation to the interviewee, while I was interviewing, I began to have a deeper understanding.*)"

Mac adds, "Dati ay maririnig mo lang na may 11 maternal deaths, ngayon makikita mo mismo yung realidad, yung picture mismo. (*Before I would hear the statistic of 11 maternal deaths* [a day], *now I see that reality, that picture itself.)*"

Mary Jane talks about changing her views, "Mas lumalim din yung pagtingin sa rh, dito ako natuto magpatawad, na hindi mo dapat hinuhusgahan ang mga tao, nag-iba ang pagtingin ko sa aborsyon, nagtatalo pa kami dati sa aborsyon ni Dr. Guy. (*I have a deeper understanding of RH, here is where I learned to forgive, that you should not judge people, before I would argue with Dr. Guy about abortion.*)"

In the FGDs and meetings, the activists also exhibited the capacity to reflect on the ethics of their work and relationships with those they featured. Mary Jane reflects the dilemma of all researchers and journalists seeking to be ethical: "May feeling sa amin na kumikita ako ng malaki at may feeling na nagamit sila dahil sa mga interview at picture ng mga anak nila. (There is a feeling in our place that I am earning a lot and they feel I have used their interviews and pictures of their children to earn.)"

Issues such as that mentioned by Mary Grace were often the subject of discussions about ethics and ethical solutions.

The researchers, especially the editors, also expressed their delight at the quality of the articles generated, the enthusiasm of the activists and their openness to learning and criticism. As Barry said,

Natuwa ako sa experience, na-exceed ng mga community journalists yung mga initial expectations, hindi ko in-anticipate yung level of honesty sa mga nagsusulat, wala masyado yung iniisisip mo.. yung iisipin mo yung iisipin ng ibang tao. Makikita mo yung basic talent, yung mga technique will come later.. yung content ng articles, ay naexpand din yugn aking pananaw.. yung pagkakataon na makapag-interact sa ng community journalists. (*I enjoyed the experience. The community journalists exceeded my expectations. I did not anticipate the level of honesty of the writing. There was none of the second-guessing, thinking about what others might think. You could see the basic talent, the technique will come later. The content of the articles expanded my views, the opportunity to interact with the community journalists*.)"

KG, who was chafing at the restrictions to her activism that going into law school brought, expressed how she looked forward to the team meetings and press work as a way of reconnecting.

Unmet project goals, unplanned accomplishments, sustainability issues

Eighty articles were planned for,while only 45 were generated. Only 24 of the 45 have been published so far. The bottle neck is in the editing process. One of the reasons for this bottle neck is intrinsic to the nature of the action-research. Editing takes longer when dealing with those who are less trained and who start from more disadvantaged situations. It also takes longer when the editors make the commitment to go beyond editing towards mentoring (see elaboration in the Discussion session below).

However, part of the reason for the bottle neck was due to an unanticipated development---the appointment of one of the editors to a high government position which resulted in his being unable to spend more time on the project.

The research team must be open to the possibility that this delay led to some discouragement on the part of the activists and to a certain extent proved dis-empowering.

On the other hand, 7 articles were translated into English and there is a commitment to translate all of

the articles eventually. This was not planned for nor funded by the project.

Before the actual 3 day training session, 2 pre-training sessions on computer basics, typing and the Internet were undertaken. This was particularly meant to help three of the older women who had no computer literacy at all. The women were taught basic operations like turning the computer on and off, typing, connecting to the Internet, using search engines and social networking programs. Again, this was on the initiative of a research team member and was not charged to project funds.

Other community members who became aware of the project formally requested that they be included in a second round of training so that they too could write and submit articles. Despite the lack of a budget, such a training was scheduled with commitment from the community activists who had undergone the initial training. Unfortunately political events (see discussion session below) caused the postponement of the planned training which remains to be accomplished after project completion.

Likhaan and the community activists have also decided to maintain the community voices section of the website featuring the articles written by the current batch of trained activists and those to be trained in the future. Articles will continue to be paid for from *Likhaan's* non-project funds.

Finally, increasing people's capacities results in unanticipated and unmeasurable results and outcomes. Evelyn in the focused group discussion talked about how she ended up writing a song about the realities of women in prostitution instead:

Nung time na yun ay malapit na akong manganak, kahit hindi ako nakapagsulat ay nakalikha ako ng mga kanta tungkol sa prosti. Maraming mahihirap na gusto talaga ng programa ng rh.. Napakaganda ng programa, malaki yung tulong ng proyekto na ito. (*At the time of the training I was close to giving birth, but even if I was unable to write for the project, I was able to write a song about women in prostitution. Many poor people really want an RH programme. RH is a beautiful programme, this project has helped a lot in making people see that.*)"

Discussion

A)   Issues regarding the embedded nature of the project

This action research is methodologically feminist because it is embedded in the women's movement for SRHR. It is lodged in one of the leading organisations working on these issues in the Philippines, and it is directed by the priorities of the movement that has made the passage of an RH bill its main activity. It is implemented by and works with social movement actors. All members of the research team are activists though the principal researcher, the co-researcher and another member of the team are also working in the academe.

As activists, the researcher members of the project team hold to feminist analyses that guide the processes and relationships in the research towards the breaking down of hierarchies and power relationships based on class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. This methodological standpoint has shaped the way the research has been implemented, as well as shaped its outcomes.

As such this action research fits the criteria of Reid (2004) quoted in the methodology section of this report.

It will be noted that a majority of articles are still up for review. The main reason for this is that the editors have found no time to do this. The editing process they put in place involves far more mentoring than what would be expected of the ordinary editor. Editing involved not just ensuring the accuracy of reports, checking for grammar or improving language, or improving the logical sequencing of the arguments and paragraphs. The editors were determined to avoid editorial roles and privileges that were based on positivist epistemological positions and/or power differentials that occur in profit oriented publications.

No imposition was made in terms of minimal or maximum length of an article, something that is afforded by the nature of online publishing but also a decision made in order to allow each activist their own freedom. Furthermore, some editors also began to teach writers to navigate logical fallacies, correct misinformation or nuance claims and interpretations by providing the writer relevant facts and analytical inputs. Editors would also interact with the writers around bigger questions of values, world views and life skills, whether these were particularly meant to clarify the article or not.

That this method was grounded in the notion of dialogue, dialogical, nurturing and reaffirming was

mentioned by the activists themselves in the focused group discussions.

However, it was not merely the greater time and effort involved in the editing that accounted for the inability of the editors to review articles. Being social movement actors themselves, they had to attend to other demands of the social movement/s they were engaged in and in particular, in the effort to pass the RH bill.

This was true for all members of the research team as well. The final quarter of the year 2011 which was also the end part of the research project was particularly hectic for the RH movement in the Philippines. In these months, the proposed RH legislation began to be debated in the plenary sessions of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This increased the work burden of all members of the research team who had to attend rallies and demonstrations, serve on technical panels for the sponsoring legislators, accept invitations to be interviewed by mainstream media, etc.

The rapid advancement of the bill through the Philippine legislature evoked a strong response by the opposition, especially the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and allied Catholic institutions. For example, the principal researcher of the project had to deal with her being labelled as an abortionist by an opposing senator during plenary debates in the Senate.

The heightened opposition and dilatory tactics of legislators allied with the Church required further extraordinary effort in order to counteract this. One effort involved getting the President Aquino to reiterate his support for the bill and certify this as a priority measure to Congress. The project's co-researcher, who had been appointed as an Under-secretary to the Office of the Presidential Adviser for Political Affairs during the course of the project, worked long hours to achieve this.

In a bid to end increasing inertia caused by delaying tactics of the CBCP, RHAN called for a continuing occupation of the park in front of the House of Representatives and daily rallies at the gates of the House. All members of the research team stopped working on the project for the latter part of November and most of December because of this.

At this point the the valuation of research and the research process is called into question. Would the achievement of the research work plan to the detriment of the desired outcomes (e.g. the certification of the RH bill as a priority measure) be considered a victory? Can this distraction from the research process be avoided through better planning or greater commitment on the part of the researchers? Is it possible to do this without disengaging the scholarship of the engaged scholar? What is the proper

balance between the laudable demands of efficiency in meeting research deadlines and the messy, iterative nature of grounded action research that insists on being empowering, politically embedded and self-reflective?

B) Can community groups and individuals in marginalised communities use ICTs from within feminist and social movement paradigms that are based on participation and social justice that allows for the prioritising of the realities and needs of marginalised youth, women and men?

In the sense that most of the articles written and pictures taken were about the lives, stories, situations, needs and difficulties of poor communities and members of poor communities, we can say that the answer to this first research question is "yes".

However, we are unable to gauge whether, how, and how much these stories have affected the ongoing struggle for the passage of the RH bill. RHAN has a separate project for monitoring mainstream media around the RH bill. From this monitoring it can be said that none of the articles so far have been taken up by mainstream media.

This poses several issues in itself. The lack in uptake by mainstream media may be due to a bias for "hard" news of generalisable and broad interest as opposed to the 'anecdotal', intimate and local stories produced by community activists. A possible indicator for this is that Google Analytics reveals an increase in the traffic to the *Likhaan* website that is partially attributed to the published articles. One would also note that these articles are in Filipino, making them inappropriate for use by the upper class and English-speaking influential individuals who are the audience of a big sector of the big media organisations.

However, there are English versions of articles. Unfortunately, there is no data available as to the demographic profiles of the readers. We could speculate based on the information provided by the activists themselves that readers of the Filipino articles are members of the communities they live in. Even if we were to assume this to be true, we have no measure about how this impacts the empowerment and solidarity of community members. We are also unable to measure what effect this has on the efforts to organise communities around sexual and reproductive rights.

The social justice and feminist paradigm applied in this research and inherent within the social movement can be more easily linked to the personal growth and empowerment of the community

members who participated in the research. The results of the focused group discussions and discussions documented during press work and meetings show that the activists are empowered on several levels.

First, they are able to use and take control of computers and the Internet for the purposes of the advocacy.

Second, they have gained skills and continue to practice these in writing and photography. In particular, the creative process entailed in these activities is a source of pleasure to them and an area that leads to personal growth.

Third, they feel a sense of affirmation when their stories are published. They feel that their work is valuable and their efforts meaningful.

Fourth, they are able to engage their lived realities more deeply and reflect on these, which results in a deeper understanding of the issues. More importantly, it results in them linking the relevance of SRHR to their own lives, families and communities.

Lastly, the appreciation of their work, replete as it is with their own grounded knowledge, reinforces their value as social actors, the legitimacy of what they know and feel, and the correctness of their desires to transform their own lives and communities.

C) Does the development of an online magazine within this paradigm change lead to some good practices about how a magazine can be constructed?

Our findings suggest that the realities of the women, youth and the marginalised communities they live in, were surfaced and made more accessible to a broader audience. In this sense, the research affirms the democratising nature of the Internet in that it gives a platform for discussions, opinions and personal accounts for individuals from poor communities and civil society organisations like *Likhaan* and people's organisations like SKMT and PILAKK.

Discursively, the knowledge contained within the online magazine is different from that found in mainstream media and academic publications. First, in terms of content, the stories bring to the fore the struggles of the poor, especially youth and women, in the arena of social reproduction that is also the purview of sexual and reproductive rights. It seems almost a travesty for this research report to abstract

in this way the detailed, intimate and grounded stories and photographs generated by the community activists. It is impossible to convey the personal honesty of the stories. Some stories stand out—the testimony of one of the community activists who has petitioned the Philippine Supreme Court to overturn a ban on contraceptives in her city; the story of the gay activist who, at a time when legislators were entertaining the thought of deleting provisions of the law that would benefit LGBT populations, has asked that SRHR approaches be more inclusive.

Despite the personal approaches that a more positivist epistemological standpoint would call 'anecdotal', the range of political positions taken by the set of articles published on the various aspects of SRHR come to the same conclusions that many academic discussions reach about the scope and limits of sexual and reproductive rights. For example, on the debate as to whether young people should have both information and services, the position taken in the various articles by the youth and their mothers is, yes.

The epistemological standpoint here, the claim to truth, is not based on professional expertise or scientific investigation. Repeatedly the activists refused or found difficult assignments given to them to produce news stories of movement events. Some activists mentioned being unable to attend the event as their reason. Others however, disliked the role of the objective observer that news reporting required. The political point being made by the online publication of these stories is for the validity of individual experiences of intimate matters. The personal is indeed political especially for the embodied subject of sexual and reproductive rights.

Finally, discourse analysis reveals that while several stories portrayed people as 'victims' (of abuse, lack of services, poverty, etc.) a more common identity shown even for the "ordinary" folk was that of social agent. For example, we see the story of a woman who is proud of having found ways to access contraceptives and putting herself in a position to decide how many children she would have. Other stories talk of youth and women's organising and other forms of political activism. In many stories, the portrayal of oppressive conditions is counter-posed to the actions of people to overcome these.

Assiter (1996: 7) argues for the validity of this claim to truth: "I argue for a version of the view that the subjects of knowledge are communities rather than individuals. Further I argue that it is the standpoint of the community most committed to "emancipatory" values that has the greatest claim to epistemic validity."

That the poor are portrayed as individuals with agency in the online magazine, therefore, is a matter to be celebrated in itself. However, such constructions of identity provide tremendous potential for overcoming the political limitations of movements who construct their *raison d'etre* around identities of victimisation. We are not claiming here that oppression does not exist and that there are no victims. There is, however, a growing critique of movements that are based on group identifications of victimisation along a single axis of oppression (Moody-Adams, 2005; Lipsitz, 2006).

Finally, it must be noted that in terms of practice, both the community activists and the project staff showed many instances of collective work and solidarity. This can be seen in the 'teamwork' cited by several activists whose combined skills facilitated the work. Sheina combined her computer skills with Lorena's ideas for stories. Such a combination was also claimed by Dioshiel and Khaila. Community coordinator Kiko worked with the women who had no computer literacy, so that they would in be in a position to join the training. Editors Jun and Barry not only edited, but also taught and mentored.

D) Does the technology itself have a dialectical effect in shaping the content generated?

During the conduct of this action research, the community activists cited several barriers to their production and submission of articles that were related to computers and the Internet. As mentioned, many of the women began with no computer skills and were still grappling with computers at the end of project implementation. The activists complained of inaccessible, dark, and noisy Internet cafés populated by young boys. They complained also about the slow Internet speeds that made sending in articles a significant investment in time. Very early in the project, they began to express a feeling of relative deprivation because they did not have personal laptops to work with at home.

Apart from these complaints, it did not seem that their capacity to write articles reflective of their realities and standpoints were hampered. Indeed we argue that what was produced is material that has the greatest epistemic validity (Assiter, 1996:7).

However, as we have also noted previously, the impact of these articles on the ongoing debate and struggle for a reproductive health bill cannot be measured and may likely be minimal.

In our 'State of the Art'-document[8] generated for this research project, we had anticipated this very outcome (Estrada-Claudio and Valdez, 2010):

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8   The State of the Art document is available here: http://www.gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen/SOA

Reproductive and sexual health and rights bridge the intimate and the public far more than other human rights. Bringing poor women' stories to the public must overcome multiple barriers of access. Even when women advocates can access the web with stories of their own struggles over their bodies, families and communities, they cannot be assured that their stories will be heard in a market place more attuned to seeing the intimate in heterosexist paradigms of violence and consumerist desire. There is also no assurance that the voices of poor women in poor communities have a space in the politics of policy-making in an elite dominated legislature.

E)   Gender, citizenship and the Internet

The specific struggle for the passage of the RH bill evokes concepts of 'active citizenship' as described by Dietz (1987) who advocates for a citizenship which is participatory and democratic. She believes that the conception that a citizen is merely a bearer of rights is 'politically barren'. Her indicator of true citizenship is active political participation. Rian Voet (1998) goes further by arguing that an active and sex-equal citizenship is achievable only if women exercise the rights they have fought so hard to gain on paper. She argues that women have to actively exercise those rights especially in the political sphere if they are truly to enjoy citizenship.

Community activist Bernice Johanna L. Gamba describes her exercise of citizenship rights in her article, "A Perspective from the Community Activists Writing Workshop", worth reproducing here in full:

Holding a training program such as the "Community Activists Writing Workshop" provides an opportunity for many people, in particular to ordinary folks like me, to learn how to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to reach out or to deliver our concerns to government using a fast and effective mechanism.

We also learned how to strengthen our ability to explain to other people and spread our views on important social issues like human rights, quality education, health care services and the RH bill.

Timeliness is one factor that deserves attention. This is why a quick mechanism to reach the public is needed, and having adequate knowledge of ICT and the Internet, which the training provided, helps a lot.

In general, as I recall the topics taught and how everyone cooperated, I can say that being accepted as a

participant turned out to be a truly meaningful experience. I learned not only from the information taught to us but also from realising the importance of being aware of and concerned about things that impact on the welfare of the majority of those around us.

A good example of this is the effective use of blogs or other forms of social media as a way to get through to society, especially the government, of the importance of promptly passing the RH Bill.

Similarly, the "Open Letter to Rep. Robes on the RH Bill", signed by the President of the Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihan ng Towerville (SMKT), is a letter to the Representative of the district where the SMKT women live. It is a more obvious exercise of the right of a citizen to hold her representative accountable.

It must also be noted that the concept of 'citizenship' or 'Filipino citizen' as a bearer of rights was never salient to the activists nor the research team as a problematic issue during the course of the research. The terms and the idea never came up as a concept to be interrogated.

This may very well be due to the delineation of the political space as clearly intra-national and the ethnic and urban homogeneity of the activists involved.

Policy implications

The results of the action research, in particular the reflections and self-assessment by the community journalists, highlight several implications for policy on both information communication technologies (ICTs) specifically, and governance and democratic representation more generally.

A)   Techno-environmental issues

Barriers to ICT access that, strictly speaking, were not based either on the lack of necessary skills or information (computer literacy, familiarity with the technology) or economic factors (no money to pay for Internet access), emerged and were identified in the course of the action research.

As was explained earlier,as part of the process adopted and agreed upon in conducting the community journalism project, the community journalists first underwent a 3-day training course on journalism and ICTs, precisely to equip them with the necessary skills for the project. In the same vein, all the community journalists were provided with funds to purchase Internet time at their local neighbourhood access portals (locally known as "Internet cafés"). There were thus conscious efforts undertaken to minimise, if not completely eliminate, barriers to ICT access based on these factors.

As previously mentioned, however, the community journalists themselves, both during the implementation of the project and in the course of the final assessment discussion, identified other problems that impaired their access.

The first broad category of these concerns can be referred to as "techno-environmental" issues. One such issue was the difficulty of getting to the nearest Internet café, which in some cases was actually quite far away from the communities in which the journalists were based. This underscores a bigger problem of availability of ICT in the Philippines, particularly in poorer communities, especially considering that all the journalists were based in urban areas. So despite the existence of "potential" access, i.e. existing coverage by Internet service providers (ISPs), the absence of actual user facilities (computers with Internet connectivity) in some of the poorer communities remains a significant barrier to ICT access even in relatively developed urban areas.

Another related issue is the sufficiency of computers at the Internet cafés themselves. Many of the journalists reported that they would often have to queue for hours before they could get to use a computer, due to the large number of customers, mostly younger people, at these cafés. Furthermore,

because of the large number of customers, many of the journalists complained that they had difficulty settling in to write their articles in the crowded, often times noisy, environment of the Internet cafés they patronised.

The quality of the Internet connection at local cafés was yet another issue that repeatedly came up in discussions with the community journalists. Slow connections made it more difficult for the journalists to access the Internet for research purposes, and likewise made it harder to upload articles and photos to the website. This also contributed to increasing their access costs as the slower rate of uploading/downloading led to paying for a longer duration of Internet use.

These techno-environmental issues underscore the importance of promoting a general, basic level of access across the board if ICTs are to have a significant impact on bringing community based advocacy efforts into the national discourse.

Despite having a fairly high proportion of the population (29.7%) with access to the Internet (Internet Statistics Database, 2012), or 29.7 million users out of a total population of just under 100 million, according to a 2010 estimate of the International Telecommunication Union, a figure more than 5% above the Asian average of 24%, the experience of the community journalists involved in the project demonstrates that people in poorer communities – even in urban areas – still experience considerable difficulties in obtaining access to ICTs and the Internet. Even if official statistics would tend to paint a picture where nearly 1 in 3 Filipinos have access, this is misleading and apparently does not take into account stratification arising from differences in economic standing.

Furthermore, the quality of access is not taken into account. As the experience of the community journalists establish, while they were able to obtain access to ICT facilities, their experience was still largely less than optimal due to various factors relating to the quality of the service and physical facilities.

Ultimately, if ICTs are to become an effective tool for promoting community-based advocacy, these issues will need to be addressed. One possible policy direction is for government to take the lead in promoting ICT access for poor, remote, and/or under-serviced communities, instead of leaving private companies and entrepreneurs solely responsible for providing the service to all. At present, there is no serious policy proposal for government to take on this role, and it is largely assumed that ICT access should remain a market concern. This cannot continue if the full potential of ICTs to advance the

advocacies of poorer communities is to be harnessed and promoted.

On a more conceptual plane, the inclusion of access to ICTs as a necessary component of upholding human rights, such as the right to information can be explored, as this will provide a firmer framework for government engagement in ICT provision. If ICT access can be put on the same conceptual level as other fundamental entitlements such as water, food, health care, or electric power, it will go a long way towards justifying efforts to push governments into spending public resources to ensure ICT access especially for the poor and underprivileged.

B) Gender and work related issues

Another set of issues that emerged from the engagement with and assessment by the community journalists of their experiences involved difficulties arising from conflicts between their journalistic work and other demands for their time and energy.

Many of the community journalists stated that they had difficulty submitting articles within agreed upon deadlines because their time was taken up by household work and family responsibilities, outside employment, and school work.

This underscores the reality that access to ICTs, by itself, and without regard to existing gender and economic roles in the communities themselves, is not a magic bullet that will suddenly and dramatically allow women in marginalised communities to effectively advance their cause at the national level. In other words, it is not simply a matter of providing women in poor communities access to ICT facilities. As with other similar interventions, this must come hand in hand with efforts to address widely occurring manifestations of gender inequality.

C) Engaging legislators and policy makers

The principal objective of the community journalism project was to "Explore how digital technologies, mainly online tools, can be used to bring the realities of grass roots communities into the public policy discourse that will arise out of the reproductive health bill." The basic idea was to utilise online journalism as a means by which community-based citizen journalists would be able to get their views, perspectives, and insights into the public policy debate on the reproductive health bill. One crucial target audience, therefore, were the actual legislators and policy makers in government who were

directly engaged in the day to day debate on the proposed bill.

Unfortunately, however, based on the assessment of the website's 'reach', it would seem that this target was largely missed. A day to day monitoring of the actual content of the ongoing debate surrounding the reproductive health bill revealed that the inputs from the community journalists as presented through the website had minimal, if any, impact on the public discourse, especially at the level of legislators and policy makers. Simply put, legislators and policy makers, by and large, were probably not able to read the articles posted by the community journalists, or if they did, did not see fit to include these viewpoints and perspectives into their own statements.

While this outcome is definitely disappointing, it underscores another limitation of ICTs in advancing an agenda: that legislators, policy makers, and other people in government – the target audience of community-based advocates – may also have a minimal online presence or limited exposure to ICTs, to the extent that attempting to engage them in this sphere will not be fully effective.

This opens up the question of whether adopting a conscious policy to encourage legislators, policy makers, and government officials to maintain a more significant online presence may promote more effective engagement with communities and constituents with access to ICTs and the Internet. For instance, if all the key legislators engaged in the debates on the reproductive health bill had their own websites, which allowed for the posting of comments or feedback, it would have been easier to direct their attention to the articles being posted by the community journalists. While the Congress of the Philippines maintains its own website (www.congress.gov.ph) it remains a largely static one and has very little facility for interaction and feedback.

An official policy encouraging the use of ICTs and the Internet to relate with and communicate with constituents for key public officials, particularly those engaged in policy formulation and legislation, will go a long way towards improving access to these offices, and expanding the participation in important policy debates.

Overall conclusions and recommendations

Using ICTs to enhance an ongoing mass struggle for the passage of a reproductive health bill situates it within a paradigm of social justice and feminist solidarity rather than profit, consumerism and patriarchal oppression. In doing so, this research interrogates the scopes and limits of its usefulness as a liberating tool. Such an interrogation would not have been possible without an adherence to a feminist action research methodology.

With regards to methodological considerations, this research elucidates the continuing dilemmas of engaged scholars and researchers using research frameworks committed to empowering the marginalised. First, there is the double burden of being both a social movement actor and a researcher. Often the time and energy of the researcher is split between the two poles of expertise and engagement. Furthermore, the commitment to emancipatory processes and outcomes of the research itself imposes even more work and time expenditure upon the researcher. This has very real consequences, such as the failure to accomplish certain targets on time. More importantly however, the breaking of the binary between research and activism presents a new set of dilemmas that cannot easily be resolved because one essentially steps out of existing paradigms about how researches are conducted and for what purposes.

The research has shown, however, that ICTs can be used by activists for advocacy purposes. It also shows that the use of ICTs allows activists and their communities to share their realities and struggles to a larger audience. Most significantly, the ICT platform allows for the publication of stories grounded in the local and the intimate. In these stories the poor are depicted not as victims but as agents of social change. Significantly too, this foregrounding of the intimate in the struggle for a better life elucidates the rationale and validity of sexual and reproductive rights in the fullest sense.

Within the methodological frame of feminism and the socio-political frame of the Philippine women's movement, the use of ICTs by activists proved to be an empowering experience. Their increasing mastery of the technology; the publication of their articles; the validation of the grounded knowledge put forth in the articles even as they themselves deepened their own grasp of that reality; and the collective support and solidarity of the research team were elements cited by the activists as contributory to their sense of empowerment. It is also interesting to note that despite their lack of computer skills and barriers to access, none of the activists felt intimidated or stifled by the technology.

It is clear however that these positive outcomes are true only at the level of the research and the online magazine. While it was beyond the scope of this research to monitor impact, it would seem that mainstream media had not picked up any of the activist's articles; anti-RH legislators continued to ignore the voices of the poor represented by these articles; national level discussions continued to be dominated by tropes of morality, sexuality, the dangers of contraception, abortion and large populations. In this case, the attempt to bridge the local and the intimate to the institutional and national seems to have failed.

Perhaps this was too much to ask. The Internet itself is structured by forces far more powerful than the entire Philippine women's movement. The Philippine State suffers from crises of governance, failures of genuine representation and the absence of real democracy that is typical of liberal democratic systems worldwide. In the sense also that the Philippine state is ideologically liberal democratic, it remains challenged by sexual and reproductive rights. The classic formulations of civil and political rights spring from liberalism's mind and body dualism that privileges the rational mind and disregards the body. Sexual and reproductive rights, arising as they have from within the feminist movements, are rights that are grounded in the body, pleasure, sexuality. In this sense, the citizen seeking sexual rights is a poor citizen of liberal democracy.

Interestingly, while the activists who used their ICT platform were unequivocal about their gender-power analyses and advocacies, they never problematised the concept of citizenship or their identity as citizens. They were very clearly exercising citizenship in demanding for a law that would assure health services from their elected representatives. However, never in the discussions or the articles was the word citizenship mentioned. Whatever the conceptual frame of their activism and their demand for rights, it did not seem to be linked to a concept of citizenship. The demands were framed by other concepts such as the right to a better life, to the development of their communities and to social justice.

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Annexure 1: Google analytics overview

Google Analytics
Dec 1 2010 - Dec 31 2011

Page	Pageviews	Unique Pageviews	Avg. Time on Page	Bounce Rate	%Exit
FILIPINO					
Table of contents page					
/fil/content/boses-komunidad	1,684	1,167	0:01:20	50.39%	18.76%
Articles					
/fil/content/rh-bill-ipasa-na-now-na	377	324	0:02:41	71.75%	52.25%
/fil/content/kinabukasan-para-kabataan	225	187	0:02:06	72.97%	38.22%
/fil/content/naging-responsableng-magulang-dahil-kaalamang-rh	215	188	0:02:33	86.49%	43.26%
/fil/content/kwento-ko	205	174	0:03:01	80.00%	44.88%
/fil/content/kuryosidad-kabataan-habang-buhay-na-responsibilidad-kinahantungan	197	170	0:02:41	83.16%	51.78%
/fil/content/nagbigay-na-buhay-pati-sariling-kalusugan-isasakripisyo	178	138	0:02:09	50.00%	29.21%
/fil/content/young-mama-0	176	148	0:01:53	72.73%	23.86%
/fil/content/responsableng-pagpapamilya-paano-kaming-bakla	167	148	0:02:40	80.23%	53.89%
/fil/content/ilaw-tahanan	163	128	0:01:51	63.16%	27.61%
/fil/content/sinong-banal	162	134	0:02:38	59.26%	27.78%
/fil/content/1500-nag-rally-para-rh-naitulak-panukala-na-pumasa-appropriations-committee	129	100	0:01:55	70.59%	44.96%
/fil/content/bata-bata-ano-iyong-ginagawa	124	104	0:01:18	80.95%	40.32%
/fil/content/bahay-na-ba	123	99	0:01:46	70.83%	23.58%
/fil/content/kabataan-may-say-ka	115	97	0:02:52	68.75%	34.78%
/fil/content/dr-esperanza-cabral-bagong-idolo-kabataan	114	103	0:01:58	76.92%	42.11%
/fil/content/aktibista-nag-training-it	99	83	0:01:48	68.00%	35.35%
/fil/content/kababaihan-maynila	95	79	0:01:40	78.95%	26.32%
/fil/content/sulat-para-kay-congressman-robes-1	84	67	0:02:01	86.36%	28.57%
/fil/content/pagkain-sisiw-para-iba-pagkain-na-para-anak-niya	82	70	0:02:45	72.73%	46.34%
/fil/content/komunidad-na-malusog-maunlad-samahan-malayang-kababaihan-towerville	74	59	0:01:18	71.43%	35.14%
/fil/content/hagupit-eo-003-family-planning-ban-maynila	68	61	0:02:36	81.82%	33.82%
/fil/content/isang-perspektibo-community-activists-writing-workshop	66	55	0:00:53	53.85%	22.73%
/fil/content/rh-bill-natapos-na-committee-public-hearing-0	31	29	0:02:15	84.00%	80.65%
/fil/content/kailan-ba-haharapin-simbahang-katoliko-katotohanan?fb_xd_fragment=	9	1	0:00:15	0.00%	11.11%
/fil/content/rh-bill-ipasa-na-now-na-0	9	9	0:00:24	100.00%	33.33%
/fil/node/929	3	3	0:00:18	100.00%	66.67%
Subtotal, Filipino articles	3,290	2,758			
ENGLISH					
Table of contents page					
/content/community-voices	943	721	0:00:51	39.22%	13.26%
Articles					
/content/when-will-catholic-church-face-reality	414	334	0:03:12	79.57%	33.09%
/content/pass-rh-bill-now	261	221	0:02:37	77.10%	53.64%
/content/community-activists-trained-it	124	113	0:01:52	66.67%	29.03%
/node/929	83	75	0:01:44	73.68%	37.35%
/content/lashes-eo-003-family-planning-ban-manila	43	37	0:01:51	60.00%	39.53%
/content/dr-esperanza-cabral-new-idol-youth	22	22	0:00:49	100.00%	27.27%
/content/perspective-community-activists-writing-workshop	17	16	0:00:44	0.00%	11.76%
Subtotal, English articles	964	818			
Total, All articles	**4,254**	**3,576**			
For Entire Likhaan Website					
all pages	798,945	598,853	0:01:46	60.57%	34.03%