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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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URUGUAY

ICTs as a means for empowerment and influence: A democratising proposal for female domestic workers in Uruguay

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Introduction

Uruguay has had policies addressing issues related to the information and knowledge society since the 1980s. In 2000 the first digital agenda was created, which shaped the first national strategy for the information and knowledge society. Later on, in the context of a leftist government, a new digital agenda was created (2008-2010) with a strong emphasis on social inclusion. Both approaches have lacked a gender perspective in their creation and implementation. Moreover, actions have been lacking that specifically address women's issues with the aim of reducing the new gender inequalities that may arise and/or those already existing which may be increased as a result of the expansion of access to and use of technologies.[1]

In this framework, many of the actions designed to promote equal participation between men and women in the use of technologies have been driven by social organisations. In this report we focus on use of ICTs by the Domestic Workers Union, which has appropriated these technologies in order to enhance its members' capabilities.

Policy and political background

According to the law on equal opportunities and rights for men and women[2] enacted in 2007, the Uruguayan state must adopt every measure in order to assure implementation of a gender perspective in the design, execution and monitoring of public policies. In spite of the creation of this law and the First Plan for Equality of Opportunities and Rights,[3] public policies addressing ICTs have not included a gender perspective. Similarly, in spite of the equal access that men and women have to ICTs, only a few policies have been promoted in order to stimulate the use of technologies by women in different realms. For example, Centros MEC (telecentres set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture) prioritise digital literacy courses for women in rural villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

Training domestic workers

> *This is a way for us to communicate with other workers, thus gaining respect as domestic workers and recognition of the importance that domestic work has for society, improving our quality of life.* (Domestic worker, 2010)

The inclusion of ICTs in women's lives as a tool for social change and the enhancement of citizenship is essential in the digital era in which we live. However, this digital era has not reached women to the same degree. Access, knowledge and appropriation of ICTs vary according to women's socioeconomic and geographical background. This is a concern as ICTs play a very important role in the exercise of rights and in opportunities for participation in every aspect of social, political and economic life.

With this in mind, an initiative involving the Domestic Workers Union (DWU) was developed, aimed at enhancing their political participation and citizenship through access to and use of ICTs. Generally, women who are employed in paid domestic jobs have a low level of education, reside in poor households and mostly work in unstable, precarious and informal jobs.

Domestic labour has historically been a sector with reduced access to labour rights and with serious issues in regard to unionisation and collective organisation. Salaried domestic work within private homes makes interactions and meetings very difficult as the women do not share a physical working space.[4]

The DWU was created in 2005 after several attempts. From that moment on, some milestones regarding the recognition of the rights of waged domestic workers were achieved. Laws were enacted which recognise their rights as well as the social and cultural space of domestic labour.[5]

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1   www.agesic.gub.uy/innovaportal/v/485/1/agesic/agenda_digital_uruguay_2008_-_2010.html and www.agesic.gub.uy/innovaportal/v/1443/1/agesic/

2   www.parlamento.gub.uy/leyes/AccesoTextoLey.asp?Ley=18104&Anchor

3   www.inmujeres.gub.uy/mides/text.jsp?contentid=594&site=1&channel=inmujeres

4   Batthyány, K. (2012) *Estudio sobre trabajo doméstico en Uruguay*, International Labour Organization, Geneva.

5   Domestic Labour Law (Law No. 18.065).

Because of this the DWU became consolidated, increased its membership and gained more social and political recognition. This process led the workers to acknowledge the importance of improving and enhancing their capacities for action and participation.

In this context, ICTs are acknowledged as important tools that help to improve the union's strategies and interventions.

In Uruguay there are no programmes or public policies which specifically train groups of women. This is even less the case when the goal is to use ICTs to improve their political and public influence. Women from low-income groups and with lower education levels, such as domestic workers, remain excluded from the development of technologies in a country which in recent years has made significant progress towards their access and use.

In order to address these problems, training was provided to women on the use of ICTs, with specific emphasis on their needs. This training took place within the framework of the global project "Raising Her Voice: Promoting poor women's participation in governance", coordinated by Articulación Feminista Mercosur (Mercosur Feminist Articulation)[6] and implemented by Cotidiano Mujer in Uruguay.[7]

This work aimed at promoting domestic worker empowerment through using ICTs as strategic tools. It also created awareness of human rights, women's rights, labour rights, and the right to access and use ICTs.[8]

Training in the different ICT tools and platforms focused on the internet, social networks, working with documents and creating presentations. It also included meaningful use of the technologies, reinforcing knowledge and practice of rights.

The course lasted six weeks and 15 women participated. The average age was 50. Previously, they had access to different technologies (mainly mobile phones and computers with internet access), which they did not use much. This was largely due to lack of knowledge on how to use them, which created fear and was therefore a barrier to their use.

The training sessions had two goals. On the one hand, it was necessary to overcome the fears that were the result of generational barriers to the use of ICTs. On the other hand, through reflection on the rights to access and use ICTs, and through the women's participation, the goal was to promote meaningful use of these tools to improve and enhance political and social influence. To this end,

the particularities, history, specific rights and the opinions of the domestic workers were considered, allowing the sessions to take on the shape of the demands and needs identified by the women workers. Electronic content was created which could reflect the domestic workers' opinions from their own perspective and without intermediaries. A blog[9] was used to share activities, rules and specific norms. It is still active, and is being used by the group to communicate and share information. In addition, presentations were created for different contexts in which the goal was to create political influence.

The outcomes of the training sessions were good. They helped domestic workers reflect on their use of ICTs and to share opinions and experiences. Post-workshop evaluation by Cotidiano Mujer involving the domestic workers who participated concluded that it was an innovative initiative which not only trained the workers in the use of ICTs so that the union was strengthened, but also promoted a shift in the women's perspective on access to and use of ICTs. Through the sessions, a group of domestic workers were made aware of the importance of incorporating ICTs in their daily lives, both professional and personal.

Conclusions

Why is it difficult for women to appropriate ICTs and use them as "techno-political" tools[10] in order to transform inequalities? For the same reason that it is hard for women to access decision-making positions, create political influence, create scientific knowledge, access better salaries and achieve social recognition. The gender digital divide adds to pre-existing gender inequalities. It interplays with economic and power relations, beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes and also reproduces and consolidates them. Specific initiatives to challenge this phenomenon are needed. This is one of Uruguay's shortcomings.

Even though ICTs are widely available in Uruguay,[11] this does not mean that they are equally used by men and women. It could be said that the gender digital divide is profoundly influenced by social gaps that create significant differences between the access to and use of ICTs by different groups.

The country has a digital infrastructure and policies on access; public access spaces and the market have resulted in the spread of ICTs. However, this

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6   www.mujeresdelsur-afm.org.uy

7   www.mujeresdelsur-afm.org.uy

8   www.apc.org/es/system/files/APC_charter_ES.pdf

9   trabajadorasdomesticasdelmercosur.blogspot.com

10 Namely, technological tools used with strategic ends for political influence.

11 According to the telecommunications company ANTEL, as of April 2013, 58% of the Uruguayan population had access to the internet.

has not been accompanied by strategies, policies and specific initiatives that reduce gender inequalities.

Depending on their use, ICTs may enhance women's participation and strengthen their opinions by stimulating their engagement in different spaces. ICTs can also increase women's capacities to perform in different realms. For this to be possible, training is needed in order to create awareness of the power of the technologies and their possible uses, including strategic uses for women with fewer resources.

In this sense, ICTs are a challenge insofar as they are a symbolic and political space, and key to development and social justice. The active participation of women is fundamental for incorporating their perspective and voice in new ongoing processes. Women's participation causes them to be creators of different policies, with different ways of doing things, different ways of naming, different places to talk and communicate, and different interactions for working and studying.

Finally, the collective work of different actors in this process – unions, public institutions and civil society organisations – is key to the planning of processes which can take the shape of the concrete needs of each group. While limited in scope, the training sessions are an example of the potential of this type of actions if they are extended to other sectors through social organisations or public policy.

Action steps

- From our analysis we conclude a need for the following measures:

- In order to face the new processes of exclusion generated by technological development, it is essential to promote unification between policies for the expansion, promotion and increased use of ICTs and policies that promote gender equality. Uruguayan public policies are not doing this, thus awareness needs to be raised.

- Public policies including a gender perspective should be adopted by involving experts on gender issues or through joint dialogue and work with the public offices responsible for the issue.

- The initiatives must be designed considering the context, needs and specific demands of women's organisations. This requires the articulation of different actors – the state, unions and social organisations.

- Further training workshops are needed in order to build, guide and continually support actions that reaffirm the acquired knowledge and continue to enhance women's capacities through the use of ICTs.

- These could be repeated in similar fashion in different places in the interior of the country based on the existing infrastructure and institutions. ▪