

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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COSTA RICA

“WE ALL PREFER TO SEE EACH OTHER IN PERSON”:
GIRLS, THE PANDEMIC AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES



Cooperativa Sulá Batsú

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Introduction

This report is a summary of the progress of research carried out by the Sulá Batsú Cooperative in Costa Rica and Central America on girls, the pandemic and digital technologies. Since 2013, the Cooperative has been working on foregrounding the concerns and proposals of girls aged 10 to 18 years in the Central American region within the broader process of the social appropriation of digital tools.

Context

The State of Education of Costa Rica in 2021 report¹ classifies the last four years as an “educational black-out”. This is not only due to the consequences of the pandemic on preschool, primary and secondary education, but also because prior to the health crisis, the deprioritisation of quality education implied a substantive setback in the educational process for many young people, to the point that Costa Rica became a regional example of stagnating educational standards.

This same report shows that half of the students in the country during the pandemic did not have the opportunity to adequately receive an online or hybrid education as a result of connectivity problems (either a lack of access or poor signal quality) or because their families did not have access to digital devices.

This situation aggravates the exclusion of young people with fewer resources, since private education continued to develop over this same period, widening the conditions of inequality for the new generations. This occurred despite the principle of universalisation and compulsory education that is established in the country’s constitution. In Costa Rica, eight out of 10 boys and girls complete primary education, only 60% complete secondary education, and only 8% complete higher education.

We have, at the Cooperative, been interested in how this context affects girls, and in this report we discuss the concerns and proposals for a more meaningful use of the internet in the country that they themselves have raised.

Before detailing the results of this qualitative work and with the purpose of giving a little more context, some relevant characteristics of girls from six to 12 years old in Costa Rica are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1.

General characteristics of girls aged 6 to 12 in Costa Rica

Characteristic	Percentage of girls aged 6 to 12
Are studying	98.6%
Have social security insurance	92%
Live in urban areas	71%
Have functional difficulties	19,2%
Are physically punished	50%
Have parents or guardians who consider it correct to physically punish their daughters	24%
Do unpaid chores at home (28 hours per month)	71.4%
Do paid chores for the family	5%
Poor and very poor households with at least one girl	48.7%
No one takes care of them	1.4%

Source: INEC, 2018-2022

1 <https://programatic-as.com/la-voz-de-las-chicas-del-centro-de-america>

From these data, it should be noted that the majority of girls are enrolled in the school and college system, but a majority must dedicate a significant part of their time to housework. In addition, many girls live in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty, and at least half receive physical punishment as a form of discipline.

The role of the internet for girls during the pandemic

We conducted a series of open interviews with 10 girls – five from rural areas and five from urban areas – in relation to the role of the internet in their lives during this period of “educational blackout”. The girls were all aged 10 to 12 years old. This work has been complemented by a discussion of two case studies that are part of a series of case studies on the use of the internet for the development of activities outside the school environment by young people.

In this report, the anonymity of the girls is maintained. To this end, profiles are established based on the common elements that have emerged from the analysis of the conversations. These have been written from the voice and perspective of the girls.

Profile built from interviews with urban girls

We had a short interruption of classes for a few weeks, but later everything was reorganised and we began to receive virtual classes. At first it was very strange to get used to this new way of having lessons. However, very quickly we began to see it as normal.

Even other activities in which we participated such as sports, arts, languages, began to be done virtually. We left off a lot of these extra activities because they weren't pretty online. But we made new friends on the internet during the pandemic because after school – for fun – we stayed playing in groups of four or five.

We can say that there was a difference within the class depending on the internet because some had a poorer connection and therefore could not do the same activities as the rest, both in class and outside of it.

In addition to playing, we did extra activities that we liked, such as taking online courses to learn new things according to the tastes of each one. We still like to take these courses.

We used the internet much more intensively during the pandemic than before, but we have decreased its use again now that we are back in person because we have less time to use the internet. We all feel more comfortable with face-to-face interaction than virtual because we have more direct contact.

Boys use the internet more than us even now that we're back in school. They use black humour a lot – it's very rude to relate to – and they build jokes

with digital tools, like rude memes. They are also more interested in online sports than we are.

We don't like this kind of humour so much, or video games. We use more WhatsApp to talk to each other. When we were younger, we wanted to be YouTubers; now we are more interested in TikTok.

The internet seems to me to be very important for life because of the information part, but it worries me because of the addictive issue. We all know that there is that danger, but we like it a lot. I try to do other things outside of the connection to avoid addiction.

After the pandemic, the class became much more aggressive, especially the boys who became more violent. They fight constantly, and it's becoming second nature. We also notice that the children in the smaller classes are also more aggressive than before the pandemic. We believe that it is because of the content they see on the internet, especially video games and videos in general.

Profile built from interviews with rural girls

We take most of the classes through guides that we receive and send over the internet. We studied like this during the pandemic because the internet connection was not good in the places where we live and we had classmates who did not have internet. We connected once or twice a week, but it was very difficult because there were many differences between the classes and it became very complicated. We also used it to do our own research and complement the studies when we had a connection.

The biggest issue was access and signal quality, even more so than whether or not we had a device. Even if it was with the mobile phones of our fathers or mothers, we communicated by WhatsApp. We made many efforts to connect, such as walking to look for a signal wherever it was, borrowing a signal from neighbours, buying a plan when possible. Teachers also made many efforts – for example, some made individual calls to follow up with students who were unable to connect.

We noticed that the boys tried to connect to the classes less than the girls. We always made more effort to comply. They lost interest faster whether or not they had connectivity. But all of us prefer face-to-face classes much more.

For fun, we use the internet sometimes when we can, but mainly to do things by ourselves, such as play games or watch a video or listen to music, but not to do things together.

During the pandemic, we were able to do a lot of things outside – we weren't as cooped up. For example, going to the river, helping my grandmother with the gardens, helping with the animals, working in

the fields with my family, going to visit close family, playing with my brothers, sisters, cousins. We didn't feel very isolated because we could do things outside. We believe that we learned a lot by doing these things and that we do less when going to school, because we have less time there. We interacted with many people from the same family.

The internet made a difference between those of us who could connect and those of us who couldn't. We believe that it is our right to have access to the internet no matter where we live. We should all be able to study quietly with connectivity.

Two case studies on the appropriation of the internet by girls and young women in the pandemic

In addition to the analysis of the role of the internet in the educational process of girls, case studies on internet use for self-organisation by girls and young women during the pandemic were also developed. Two of these cases studies were developed in Nicaragua and Guatemala, with both processes supported by our Sulá Batsú Cooperative. For the development of the case studies, a review of digital resources was made and a public forum was held with the participation of the young female leaders.

Case 1: Colectivo Tonantzin, Nicaragua

This is a group of girls and adolescents (10 to 18 years old) that emerged from a training programme in the safe use of digital technologies led by Sulá Batsú for Central America. They belong to an art group dedicated to engraving. During the pandemic, their families saw job opportunities greatly reduced with the economic consequences that this implies.

They decided to organise themselves to sell their prints digitally. They carried out various online sales campaigns and managed not only to generate their own income for the group and their families, but also to position themselves nationally and internationally as artists. With this leap through using the internet, they strengthened themselves as organised young women and consolidated the organisation of their collective.

“Belonging to the collective and having managed to sell our art nationally and internationally through the internet and help our families has allowed us to strengthen ourselves as young women and believe in ourselves,” said Julieth Valle, a member of Colectivo Tonantzin, in an interview.

Case 2: Colectivo Bats, Guatemala

Colectivo Bats is a group of mostly young women, aged 12 to 19, led by one of our female leaders from Guatemala. The group has the motto “We are and we have the strength of the volcanoes.” The collective is

dedicated to social and community work using street art and popular sports.

They indicated that online social networking is useful for them because it allows the work they do to be seen. “We are the leaders, but we don't always have money. We use social networks to generate our resources from the dissemination of our work. We create contacts and alliances little by little, and we get them to support the work we do,” said Ester Salazar, a member of the collective.

During the pandemic, they used the internet to encourage people to help create “dignified packages” that were used to support families in greatest difficulty in Jocotenango, where they work. “Through this campaign we managed to distribute packages to many families. We collected things and distributed them with our bicycles,” Salazar said.

“Thanks to this process we were able to break stereotypes about everything that young women can do when we organise ourselves and use the internet to do things that come from our hearts. We work against stereotypes and against the system. It also helped us to work collectively,” she said.

Conclusions

It is urgent to listen to girls and young women. They have particular situations determined by their age and gender that are decisive for the construction of local actions and the definition of public policies. It is urgent to build proposals based on their conditions, always listening to their voices and building processes with them, where they are truly involved.

It was already known that the difference in quality internet access was substantial between rural girls and urban girls. This was confirmed once again in the profiles that we developed through our work. However, it is important to appreciate the different strategies used by rural and urban girls to deal with the pandemic.

Urban girls turned to the internet to get through the pandemic, not only studying with greater ease online, but also getting together to play games with their friends and taking extra courses available online on topics that interested them. Several extra class activities that they organised also took place online.

Rural girls were less confined and many of their activities were able to continue in open spaces. They learned new things through their family interactions and being outside. Despite the fact that they were not able to complete their formal education in good conditions – and despite the multiple efforts of their teachers – they did not stop learning. These learnings that took place in their rural environments, and through interacting with their families and other children close to them in the communities, are not

properly acknowledged as part of their education over the past two years.

It is also very important to acknowledge the innovative social uses of digital technologies by girls and young women, as briefly described in the two case studies presented. As shown, girls and young women launched exceptional initiatives using the internet. It is necessary to encourage these uses: the internet allowed them to organise, empower themselves and support their families and communities. The encouragement of these uses of digital tools should be part of the educational processes of girls.

Girls identified differentiated uses of digital technologies compared to boys, both in rural and urban areas. It is urgent to pay attention to these differences, analyse them and determine if any interventions are necessary to ensure that young people's interaction with the internet is healthy and productive.

Recommendations and action steps

It is essential to give girls a voice in the construction of digital strategies so that they can influence the exercise of digital rights.

During the pandemic they have lived in and transformed their digital world based on their age, where they live, and gender. These experiences should not be underestimated in the construction of educational policies, and other policies impacting on children's rights and community actions. Contact with digital technologies and the differences that this produced in their lives has not left them indifferent to the potential of these technologies to bring about change.

From their point of view, girls and boys have different uses of digital technologies. They link an increase in aggressiveness among their peers with access to digital technologies and the internet and how it is used. It is essential to analyse this perception in greater depth so that it can inform public and educational decisions.

Our Cooperative will continue working with the girls, especially in relation to their use of the internet, to 1) position their voice, 2) strengthen them, and 3) encourage initiatives where they can support themselves, their families and communities, because this potential interests them very much.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org