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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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COLOMBIA

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



Colnodo

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Introduction

In Colombia, the use and ownership of information and communications technologies (ICTs) have been a priority on the last government's agenda and therefore easy to implement. The most recent initiative is the Vive Digital Plan¹ designed and implemented by the Ministry of Communications in the last three years and with four priorities: users, services, applications and infrastructure.

Vive Digital does not include a gender perspective, although some organisations have highlighted the need to include this perspective in order to promote applications aimed at women and developed by women with a differential approach – without reinforcing stereotypes.

Regarding women's organisations, most of them work to defend women's rights, a pressing issue due to the armed conflict in the country. The right to be heard and the rights of women in digital spaces have started to be recognised, although more sectors need to be involved in their defence.

This is the context for this GISWatch report on Colombia: the right of women to a safe virtual space free of violence.

Policy and political background

In Colombia, as in most developing countries, the widespread use of devices such as computers, mobile phones and tablets, and access to internet services such as applications, portals and social networks, are contributing to new ways of exerting violence, and, for the aggressors, new and easy ways of approaching their victims. This is worsened by the armed conflict in the country, where human rights are constantly violated. Therefore it is important to recognise and name the growing forms of violence committed against women using ICTs.

There are no laws legislating against violence against women in the field of ICTs: "The present legislation on ICTs does not refer to gender, and the

legislation that protects women from violence does not mention ICTs as means used to exert violence."² Therefore, it is important to refer to the human rights framework of the Colombian constitution, and to the international treaties and agreements signed by the Colombian government.

In recent years there has been significant progress in recognising acts of violence against women as human rights violations and women's rights protection as a priority for society and the state, through promoting the prevention of violence, protection of women and the fight for the eradication of violence against women. One of the most important tools is Law 1257 of 2008, which stipulates norms for recognising, preventing and punishing all forms of discrimination and violence against women. This legislation is commonly known as the law on "the right of women to a life free of violence".

The gender digital divide in Colombia

Class, generation and gender differentiate the use of ICTs. Women face more obstacles to access ICTs and to make the most of them. With older women or women in low-income sectors the gender digital divide increases dramatically.

The national government, through the Ministry of ICT,³ has made important efforts to promote the use of ICTs among the population: around 56% of Colombians are internet users, the coverage of mobile phones is almost 100%, the ownership of technological resources is growing, and the potential of technological tools is increasing due to falling prices. Despite these trends, the country still has a significant gap in the access women have to ICTs, especially among the poorest inhabitants and in rural areas.⁴ This situation is making access to technology more difficult for women, and has reduced the potential impact of ICTs on their work and educational and social opportunities.⁵

1 www.mintic.gov.co/index.php/vive-digital

2 Caicedo Naranjo, D. C. (2012) Baseline study of the legislative framework on violence against women and ICTs in Colombia, conducted as part of the APC project Women's Rights in Digital Spaces, funded by FLOW.

3 www.mintic.gov.co

4 www.slideshare.net/alfreakm/percepccion-usos-y-hbitos-frente-a-las-tecnologas-de-la-informacin-y-la-comunicacin

5 According to a study conducted by Ipsos, 70% of the men and 56% of the women surveyed access the internet regularly. (Ibid.)

Women in Colombia have less access to ICTs given the multiple roles they have to assume as mothers, wives, workers and citizens, which can make it difficult for them to find the time to learn new skills. Another reason is the level of income and economic resources needed to buy ICT tools when the family could have other priorities, such as buying a new household appliance (e.g. a refrigerator) or fulfilling basic family needs.

The Ministry of ICT has promoted several initiatives in order to encourage the use of ICTs among women, which mainly involve training in how to use a computer, surf the internet, use office applications and take advantage of the online resources offered by different ministries.

Violence against women in the context of ICTs

According to the National Public Policy for Gender Equality in Colombia, violence is the main human rights violation against women and has become “a problem of justice, public health, and public security needing a holistic approach, engaging all groups of society in order to change the cultural patterns which would enable the eradication of all forms of violence against women.”⁶

One of the most important initiatives regarding this issue was called Women You Have Rights, We Are with You, launched in March 2011 and developed in accordance with Law 1257 of 2008, which aims to diminish all forms of violence against women. The initiative was carried out by the Colombian government’s Inter-Institutional Communications Committee, set up to tackle violence against women. This committee was promoted by the Ministry of ICT and included members of governmental agencies and international cooperation agencies. The initiative ended at the beginning of 2012.

The national policy for responsible use of ICTs supported by the Ministry of ICT and the Vive Digital plan is called *En TIC Confío* (In ICTs I Trust). This policy⁷ aims to teach and raise awareness of the opportunities and risks that the internet entails, particularly for children and young people. This initiative needs a gender perspective, considering that women are more at risk and given that the hostile, misogynist and discriminatory acts they have had to endure in real life are translated into the virtual world.

The UN Women office in Colombia leads and takes part in several campaigns and strategies in order to eradicate violence against women. In

September 2012 it officially joined the Secretary General’s UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign.⁸

Although cases of violence against women using ICTs have become more visible and recognised, there are no specific initiatives for the prevention of this violence. The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare⁹ is responsible for tackling issues to protect children under the age of 18, while the national police deals with ICT crimes. The State Prosecutor’s Office has a department in charge of handling ICT crimes. However, often women do not report these offences for lack of trust in these institutions. Organisations defending human rights may be even more distrustful given the information they have access to and the lack of confidence in untrustworthy civil servants.

In Colombia, Law 1257 of 2008 is recognised as a crucial law to defend the rights of women to a life free of violence. Although this law does not include violence against women using ICTs, civil society organisations following this issue are beginning to consider its relevance across the board.

The project Women’s Rights in Digital Spaces, coordinated by the Association for Progressive Communications,¹⁰ supported by the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs (DGIS) Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) Fund and coordinated in Colombia by Colnodo,¹¹ is completing a map of cases of violence against women involving ICTs, from which we have identified the most common acts of aggression:¹²

- Young women are at risk of being approached by paedophiles who use false profiles in social networks to gain the confidence of their victims and convince them to send intimate pictures of themselves so that they can later use these images to blackmail them. Often these aggressions end up in sexual abuse and sometimes in homicides. The victims’ parents have denounced some of these cases and the aggressors have been captured. However, it is difficult to follow up on the cases and to know if the aggressors have been prosecuted.
- Women have been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and because of their work in defence of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual (LGBTI) community.

8 <http://www.un.org/es/women/endviolence/>

9 <http://www.icbf.gov.co>

10 <http://www.apc.org>

11 <http://www.colnodo.apc.org>

12 <http://www.dominemoslatecnologia.co/mapa/>

6 www.equidadmujer.gov.co/Documents/Lineamientos-politica-publica-equidad-de-genero.pdf

7 <http://www.enticconfio.gov.co/>

- Women activists and human rights defenders have been victims of threats and aggression using ICTs. This situation has been reported and recorded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia. In a 2010 report, the High Commissioner reported: “In 2009, our office in Colombia observed an increase in the number of death threats and intimidations through emails and pamphlets against human rights defenders, social and community leaders and other marginalised groups” (Document A/HRC/13/72, paragraph 23).¹³
- Women activists and human rights defenders and NGO, network or movement members have been the victims of hackers, phone hacking and spyware or have had their computers stolen. These aggressions are committed to intimidate and threaten women but also to acquire confidential information such as databases with information about the victims of the Colombian conflict, claims and court cases, among others.
- Adult women have been recorded without their consent in sexual activities and later blackmailed or intimidated.
- Young women have been incessantly harassed by their partners or ex-partners via mobile phones. There have been cases in which the partner has installed spyware in the woman’s personal computer. Unfortunately, most of these cases are not reported for lack of confidence in the authorities or because of fear.

In addition to these violations, women are also typecast in a way that does not favour equitable gender relationships in a country with a strong macho culture, and with a biased view of beauty, usually westernised.

Conclusions

Although Colombia has progressed significantly towards reducing the digital divide, it is necessary to design and develop strategies to cross-fertilise growth in access and ownership of ICTs with a gender approach, targeting women from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, older women, women with disabilities and victims of armed conflict, so they can improve their quality of life and enjoy the opportunities that ICTs can provide.

With the widespread use of ICTs, violence against women in the virtual space has also increased. So far there is no institution promoting any formal action to make ICTs safe for women. To achieve a virtual space free of violence, more advocacy work with the women’s movement and civil society organisations is required in order to tackle the problem at a political and legislative level. However, there is currently no specific plan in place to tackle violence against women online where government institutions and civil society organisations can unite their efforts using the formal and legal tools available.

Human rights and women’s organisations recognise the great potential that ICTs have for empowering women and – for women working for the defence of human rights – their usefulness for coordinating activities, improving communications, making their work known to the general public, fundraising, and communicating in emergency situations or when the safety of women is at risk. However, ICTs have also been used to attack women involved in the defence of human rights. Some of the most common modalities are threats, violation of the right to privacy and safety through social networks, stealing computers to get private information, and the interception of communications, including phone hacking, sometimes by government intelligence agencies. These threats are used to destabilise women, frightening them and preventing them from speaking out.

Most of these threats are carried out using mobile phones, emails and messages distributed online, which have a massive impact on women’s organisations and their families. As one woman human rights defender explains: “This way of threatening is more omnipresent than when it is direct and physical. Whoever sends a threat could be anywhere; he or she could be living next door or many miles away.”¹⁴

Even though ICTs allow people to communicate rapidly or to warn someone about a risk or threat, human rights defenders maintain that they do not always trust the security measures provided by the state. They have found out that their personal mobile phones can be tracked and all their phone calls and movements monitored. Instead of feeling protected they feel controlled and surveilled.¹⁵

¹³ Quote from “Diagnostic on the use of ICTs and violence against women who are human rights defenders in Colombia”, prepared by Ana María Díaz, Human Rights and Humanitarian Law consultant for Colnodo, as part of the Cyber Stewards Network, with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), April and May 2013.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Action steps

- Continue involving women's organisations and human rights defenders in the defence of a virtual space free of violence against women.
 - Develop a proposal specifically to tackle violence against women using ICTs. This should include governmental institutions with information about violence against women as well as a network strategy to unite efforts between different sectors and institutions.
 - Encourage the prevention, reporting and punishment of offences by the institutions responsible for protecting the population.
- Lobby the institutions responsible for legislating on these matters. To this end, it is essential to document cases of violence against women using ICTs and to prepare bills to improve the content of Law 1257 of 2008 and/or produce new bills or laws related to violence against women online.¹⁶
 - Promote citizens' mobilisation acknowledging the violence against women using ICTs online. It is also essential to launch online campaigns in order to eradicate all acts of violence against women.¹⁷ ■

¹⁶ For more information see Caicedo Naranjo (2012) Op. cit.

¹⁷ The FLOW-funded Colnodo project, Women's Rights in Digital Spaces, is leading up the APC campaign Take Back The Tech in Colombia and has launched a website where resources, campaigns and actions on the issue are provided. dominemoslatecnologia.org