

# Strategy Planning Workshop of the Feminist Network on Gender, Development and Information Society Policies

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## Media and Community Networks – The Information Society Context

### The context: communication and social movements (focusing on Latin America)

1) Media and ICTs need to be understood within the broader social and political context, which is undergoing a phase of change, as the neoliberal "all-out-market" model applied over the past 25 years is showing signs of becoming increasingly untenable.

In the context of Latin America, the impact of these policies over the past 25 years has had a devastating impact on the majority of women. The eighties saw a return to formal ("low intensity") democracy throughout the region; but the economic adjustment policies dislocated most forms of social organization. Latin America may be the least poor of the southern continents, but it has historically been the region with the greatest gaps in distribution of wealth, and these continue to increase, generating political and social unrest and instability. In reaction to this huge injustice, resistance has been rebuilding since the 90s, especially from the rural areas and the indigenous peoples.

2) In these circumstances, women from marginalized social groups have been excluded from participating in democratic life (exercising citizenship), beyond the right to vote. They begin to discover ways of doing so when they participate in organizations (women's or mixed). Women have led a number of the most dynamic social struggles taking place in the region recently: for water, against Free Trade Agreements, against mining in their communities, etc. It is through their organizations that they can potentially develop social communication capacities, and find the need to do so.

3) Today, Latin America has become the region of the world with the most interconnected social movements, including the participation of a number of women's networks. This has been one of the key factors in the shift towards elected governments that are more autonomous from Washington, in some cases ushering in more radical projects of change. A central demand is greater participation in democratic life, with more transparency and less corruption; and from that perspective, access to the means of expression. The mainstream media are coming under increasingly heavy criticism and are losing credibility.

As these organizations mobilizing for social justice find their voices blocked or their organizations stigmatized by the mainstream media, they are creating their own communications mechanisms, with the means at their disposition: meetings, rallies, community radio spaces, mobile phones, Internet... In this way, a **reconnection of communication with social action** is taking place - a radical change from the role of passive spectators imposed by television.

It expresses a change of paradigm from mediated communication (susceptible to institutional control) towards communication as dialogue: ie participation in creating and sharing ideas and knowledge. What academics have been reflecting on in conceptual terms, in the last 5 years or so has been starting to take place in practice, but in answer to a concrete need, not something planned or conceived in advance.

No doubt comparable things are happening in some other parts of the world: blogs, mobile phones as a means of mobilization, etc. A point to reflect on: in the North it appears to be more individualized, in the South (or at least in Latin America), more linked to organizations.

4) A debate that is opening up among social movements (regionally and globally) is the need to think more strategically: how to build a counter-hegemonic communication system. In other words, not to envision alternative communication as the poor cousin of the mainstream media, but as a space for empowerment: of an integrated web of communication capable of becoming a counter-weight to the corporate system. This would necessarily involve collaborative and not competing media initiatives, in order to develop sufficient strength to be a counter-weight to the dominant media culture and ideology. The link with existing social networks and movements would ensure a potential multiplying effect.

Women's involvement and leadership in such initiatives would be crucial -from the outset- to ensure a cross-cutting gender perspective. For women's and feminist communication initiatives and networks, it would mean a far wider impact than we could have individually or only within our existing networks.

### **Gender, development and information society policies: some thoughts**

5) The new forms of communication that have become possible with ICTs have a great potential for more horizontal, interactive and participative communication. But we should be wary of equating this with a more democratic communication system. The corporate communications system is the first to promote these new communication forms as a new (and highly successful) source of profit. The greater part of cyberspace is colonized by this system and most of the new communication flows taking place, even if they create an illusion of freedom, are firmly under corporate control. There are worrying developments such as making surveillance techniques appear innocuous or fun.

Precisely one of the obstacles faced by the movement to democratize communication is the fascination for these novelties that are seen as the "amiable" face of the corporate economy.

Women, in particular, are being incorporated massively into the "information society", but as consumers or as cheap labour, rather than as decision-makers, developers of technology, opinion-makers.

6) The gender policies of the ICT for development community emphasise aspects such as education, health, technical training for women, more women in technical careers, micro-enterprise. All of these may well be valid measures for promoting greater gender equality within the existing communications environment, but hardly constitute in themselves a feminist vision of transformation of this environment.

ICT for social networking, alternative and community media, (arguably the biggest success story in ICTs for development), is rarely mentioned.

7) One of the greatest achievements of feminism over the past four or so decades -the quiet revolution- has been certain changes in cultural attitudes. Overt expressions of sexism and machismo are now less socially acceptable, at least in Western societies, than they used to be (even if they persist in personal attitudes). But on other counts we have lost ground: we have won a degree of sexual liberation, but at the cost of a far more pervasive and widely accepted exploitation -especially in media- of women as sex-objects. Such images are deeply embedded into the corporate and patriarchal media system - women's bodies buy audiences

and audiences are sold to advertisers.

Counteracting this trend calls for both attacking the social acceptability of such images, but also being creative in developing a new set of values and a new media aesthetic that can gain wide acceptance. This is one of the central challenges we face in creating an alternative media system.

### **Ideas for a feminist network**

8) The tendency within the feminist movement, over the past decade, to focus on mainstreaming and gaining spaces in political power, has secured some important achievements (more women elected and in governments; gender policies within institutions). But it has done so largely at the cost of developing the movement itself that has tended to become demobilized or institutionalized.

Regaining a sense of movement will be crucial to taking on new fields of action.

9) If feminism is a proposal for humanity, and not just for women's equality in a grossly unequal social and economic system, then in the present context, the fight against patriarchy cannot be dissociated from the fight to change the corporate-dominated economic model, which is one of patriarchy's mainstays. This implies creating alliances with other social groups and movements that are fighting along similar lines on different issues.

In the field of ICTs and communication, this would include movements working on issues such as free-software, for open-access and against IPR, for media reform, community media, etc.

10) We need to define what the central challenge we are facing is. For example:

- Is it how to make better use of media and ICTs as instruments to further the cause of gender equality in society?

- Is it how to take on communication as a terrain of social and ideological dispute and transformation, where women have a crucial role to play?

Would these approaches be contradictory or complementary? What are the policy implications of each?

11) Taking into account the above, one key issue is for women to be empowered in how to take communication into their own hands; how to communicate effectively; how to master the tools; how to develop communications policy and strategies, etc.