

The Internet and Citizenship – Applying a Gender Lens

Abstract for the IGF workshop by Margarita Salas

In 2002 the United States of America started the process to implement a Free Trade Agreement with Central America and Dominican Republic (CAFTA) that met the resistance of the different expressions of the social movement in Costa Rica, since it steered away from the historical conquests that conformed the socially conscious state.

Within this broad social movement against CAFTA the feminist movement strategically used digital technologies to make their proposals and concerns visible. The feminist movement did not just oppose CAFTA, they also had a vision of how they would like the country to be and the referendum also proved to be a space for them to share this vision with all the men and women they met in the different activities and spaces they developed.

The struggle against CAFTA was marked by an important power imbalance: the government had all the formal power to communicate with the population and the support of the large enterprises also meant more economic resources to support promoting and organizing in favor of CAFTA. Since the mainstream media was openly in favor of the agreement the social movement used a combination of online and offline communication strategies. The internet became a virtual meeting point where content was uploaded by academics and downloaded, printed and distributed in communities for all to read; where podcasts of rural women stating their ideas would be uploaded by local organizations and be broad casted through radio channels. The fight against CAFTA proved that you don't need to be connected to harvest benefits from the Internet, as long as there are collective uses in place.

This situation played in favor of women and of the Feminist movement, because if there had been enough resources to communicate through the mainstream media and the formal structures it would have been unlikely for women to have the key role that they had. Women opened up their own spaces and made their voices and opinions heard.

Within the campaign conducted by the social movement, women had a key role, both through the feminist movement as well as individual women integrated in other sectors. The social movement lost the referendum against CAFTA (51% vs. 48%), however a lot was gained in the process. For the first time there was community organization that went beyond political party interests. People of different ages, professional backgrounds and political tendencies came together in Patriotic Committees. The communities valued and recognized the leadership of women within issues of national importance that affect both men and women. Also, some of the issues that affect women more directly or that were seen as important by women were given a place as part of the problems the community faces as a whole.

The leadership of the social movement was enriched, making visible the presence of female leaders, raising their voices and establishing them as figures of knowledge. In recent visits to rural communities we've heard activists that fight for land talk with respect regarding the local women's organizations, because in the fight against CAFTA they saw their capacities and strength and understood it's important for women to have their space.

The feminist movement also came out stronger from this fight and developed alliances with other sectors, who had the opportunity to listen to them and see that the feminist vision of the world very much coincides with the vision of many social movements and it's a very comprehensive and holistic approach.

