Community Networks

with a gender perspective

Weaving networks

that embrace

by Nodo TAU (*)

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"They used to say to her: Why do you get involved with things like computers? Why do you want to go to university even though it's full of men? Why are you always with tools? They called her a tomboy, a lesbian. She wanted to study systems.
For her, climbing the tower meant a lot of things.
Achieving it meant breaking down a lot of barriers (...)
She was a very active participant in the radio and was leading the community network. And for her, being able to keep up with all the maintenance tasks, like installing this tower, was extremely important. It's a reason to celebrate that a woman dares to climb the tower and has the opportunity to do so."
Jésica Giudice, AlterMundi
<u>*They weave inclusive networks in the Seedbed.*</u>

Introduction

Internet is a Human Right

On June 27th, 2016, the United Nations General Assembly established the promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights on the internet and recognized its "driving force in accelerating progress towards development in its various forms." It also emphasizes "the importance of applying a human rights-based approach to facilitate and expand access to the internet, calling on all States to do their utmost to close the multiple forms of the digital divide."[1]

However, according to the International Telecommunication Union's <u>report</u> on global connectivity in 2022, in the last 30 years, the number of people connected to the internet has gone from a few million to nearly 5 billion, which still leaves one-third of humanity (2.9 billion people) without access to the internet, and many of those users only enjoy basic connectivity.[2]

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[1] United Nations General Assembly (June 27, 2016). Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet. Available at <u>https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/S/HRC/d_res_dec/A_HRC_32_L20.pdf</u>
[2] International Telecommunication Union (2022). Global Connectivity Report 2022. Available at <u>https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/06/22-00399A_WTDC_Connectivity-report_Executive_summary_S.pdf</u>

"Having digital devices, accessing the internet, knowing and appropriating new platforms, creating applications, and innovating in software are some of the necessary skills to achieve the benefit of technological development," said Patricia Peña, coordinator of the Digital Communication Diploma at the University of Chile, in an article[3] published on the Genderit.org portal.

The digital divide is nothing but a reflection of the social gap in the digital world. This inequality in access is not the only variable that widens the gap. There is a qualitative dimension of indicators linked to "how to access", that is, access to what internet and what services associated with this technology (social networks, search engines, streaming, or online services for government, health, education, etc.) and with what quality and speed of connection.

Although ideally all people should have equal access to the internet and new technologies, access is not equal between men and women. This is partly what is called the "gender digital gap": worldwide, 62% of men use the internet, compared to 57% of women, according to the aforementioned ITU report.[4] In Latin America, "the gender digital gap has a woman's face" and deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic, generating a lack of connectivity and the impossibility of women and their families developing in educational and work contexts.[5]

This unequal form of access is also linked to a key factor: the relationship between women and technology as a sociocultural issue; linked to historical roles, gender stereotypes, biologistic and patriarchal myths based on the premise that the technological world is not for women. The typical internet user is often identified as a male, white, under 30 years old, with a high or medium socioeconomic status, and highly or moderately educated.[6]

A visual report coordinated by NIC.ar and various organizations dedicated to work on women, gender, information and communication technologies in Argentina[7] concluded that in 2018, women had 26% less chances of using mobile internet compared to men, with 16.34% of women not having access to the internet, and around 9% of women who do have access not knowing how to use it. Additionally, in programming-related careers, only 16% are women, and women occupy only 21% of leadership positions and 3% of managerial positions in the technology industry.

The issue of the gender digital divide primarily refers to the inability of more women to access and use digital technologies in the same proportion as men, and exercise the human right to opportunities for learning, employment, access to services, and participation in democratic

[3] CIMAC Noticias (2015) Digital divide denies women access to technology. https://genderit.org/node/4562

[4] Quoted by Mondelo, I. (August 29, 2022) Community networks and female leadership, in the Siempre Newsletter.

[5] Peña, P. (2021) Launching of the Reconectadas Project: "Building community Internet and with a gender lens". Available at https://datosprotegidos.org/conversatorio-reconectadas-internet-comunitaria-con-enfoque-de-genereroy-feminist/

[6] Peña, P. (2016) Internet access: beyond wires, a governance at the service of people and communities. Available at https://genderit.org/node/4792

[7] Genderit (25 June 2019) Argentina: removing barriers to close the gender digital divide. Available at https://genderit.org/node/5292

debate. Closing the digital divide presents an opportunity for women to take advantage of all the benefits that come with the use of technology and also to participate in decisions that have to do with their development and incorporation.

From this perspective, the digital divide is a form of violence as the lack of access and utilization of technologies not only violates human rights but also directly marginalizes women from development. It is also important to note that information and communication technologies are transversal to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations,[8] as they affect various aspects of human development potential and possibilities, both in promotion and limitation.

Historically, the role of women has been linked to caregiving tasks for the home and family as the primary role in communities. These tasks are mostly not economically recognized and are based on caring for people, spaces, performing labor, and are socially presupposed to be women's tasks. These structural, symbolic, and patriarchal limitations make it difficult for women to take on other roles and learning related to the technological world and, in particular, digital information and communication technologies.

On the other hand, the construction of masculinity is deeply linked to strength, the manipulation of machinery, the use of technology, the manipulation of powerful or noisy tools, and jobs at heights, such as towers or roofs. As shown in the Illustrated Journey of Women through Community Networks by Bruna Zanolli and Cynthia el Khoury: `for example, if a father or grandfather needs help with a task that involves tools or any other type of work related to mechanics, electricity, and engineering, it is most likely that he will call his sons or grandchildren (...) Inequalities in power dynamics and relationships generate a widespread lack of respect for women´.[9]

Building feminist and community spaces for access:

`*My gender does not define what I am capable of doing*´

Community networks are a mode of autonomous connectivity solutions that make it possible to reduce the digital divide and connect communities that do not have access to internet. `They are presented as a solution in populations underserved by the market, such as rural populations and popular neighborhoods. They are digital networks managed by people who organize themselves without profit to solve their own communication situation by exercising their Right to

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[8] UNDP. SDGs in action. https://www.undp.org/es/sustainable-development-goals
[9] Bruna Zanolli and Cynthia el Khoury (31 October 2019) Women's illustrated journey through community networks. Genderit.org. Available at
https://www.genderit.org/es/feminist-talk/edicion-especial-viaje-ilustrado-de-mujeres-por-las-redes-comunity

Communication,´ defined by AlterMundi, an organization committed and a reference for the promotion of community connectivity experiences.[10]

Community networks can involve internet connectivity, can also involve the development of an internal community network or intranet, and there are also experiences that involve the deployment of mobile phone networks. They are great allies in the processes of technology appropriation and in the search for autonomy because it is the same communities and groups that take on the challenge of creating their own communication infrastructure and innovating in the use of these technologies, adapting them to their needs and interests.[11] The appropriation of technology is strengthened because it is the communities that sustain the networks, adding the necessary knowledge and skills for their operation, maintenance, and occasionally their creation as well.

"They constitute themselves as collectives, indigenous communities, or non-profit civil society organizations that exercise their right to communication under principles of democratic participation of their members, equity, gender equality, diversity, and plurality," as indicated by the document agreed upon by the experiences that participated in the September 2018 Latin American Community Networks Summit.[12]

"While women are the guardians of body, environmental, and mystical technology, they are removed from their right to access digital platforms."[13] One of the great challenges of community networks, which are already flourishing in various geographies, is to question, involve, and encourage the participation of women in communities to plan, design, install, and sustain them. The landscapes, climates, and idiosyncrasies specific to the places where these experiences develop are diverse, but collective experiences have much in common in different territories.

In Argentina, there are various experiences of community networks, both urban and rural, that allow for connectivity in areas where companies do not invest or where resources to pay for the service are scarce and costs become inaccessible. In all of these experiences, a gender perspective allows us to find the traces of a patriarchal system that does not guarantee women's participation on its own. From assumptions and stereotypes that associate men more with technological tasks, to the unquestioned assignment of care and domestic tasks, which are not recognized and do not leave time for other tasks.

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[10] AlterMundi https://AlterMundi.net/
[11] Mondelo, Ivana. (29 August 2022) "Community networks and female leadership" in Newsletter. "Always cyborg, never goddess".
[12] Document Latin American Community Networking Summit (September 2018) https://AlterMundi.net/media/uploads/documento-final_CLRC-2018.pdf
[13] Cynthia el Khoury and Kathleen Diga (2019) "Women's Circles that Ground and Sustain. Community Networks" Available at https://genderit.org/es/editorial/circulos-de-mujeres-que-fundamentan-y-sostienen-redes-comunitarias

From a gender perspective, the reality of women becomes evident in some statistical data. In Argentina, according to the latest census, the formal employment unemployment rate for women is 22 percent, twice the overall unemployment rate of the country's census.[14] Many of these women are organized in cooperatives and spaces of popular economy. 34 percent of women indicate as their most relevant occupation the unpaid household tasks."

Community networks bring into play this tension from their very definition: on the one hand, they are technological networks that are developed to solve connectivity, a piece of work that involves technical knowledge and tasks, some of which are very simple, and others quite complex. But they also do so from a community context that, from the same stereotypes that exclude women from technology, is prioritized for women because it is the realm of daily life support, household tasks, elderly and child care.

Experiences and Geographies

Atalaya Sur is a network deployed in Villa 20 in the City of Buenos Aires that stands out as an urban experience. They started in 2014 from a community radio station with public internet access; in 2019, the network reached 60 households. The Covid-19 pandemic and the preventive and compulsory social isolation made even more evident the lack of public policies, from infrastructure to water and connectivity, a resource that became essential in this context, mainly to support schooling.

Manuela Gonzalez Ursi, a member of Atalaya Sur, who defines networks "as fundamental actors in the universalization of access to the internet and technological appropriation of communities," points out that there are currently 700 connected families thanks to an antenna they installed and maintain collectively and self-managed, tasks mainly led by women. In addition, they work strongly on the social appropriation of technology with technological training workshops for children and adolescents.[15]

The members and managers of Atalaya Sur went through the process of training in a new technology together, being able to implement it in the neighborhood, manage, seek financing, recognize tools, learn the technological language, and deploy a world of possibilities around work based on the training of young people in these tasks. "They know that there are no limitations, they are the founders of a neighborhood wifi network, which they built step by step, however, as they enter the technical world to obtain agreements with companies or job positions

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[14] ECLAC (2021)
https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/46633-la-autonomia-economica-mujeres-la-recuperacion-sostenible-equality
[15] Nodo TAU (2022) "Internet rights in a pandemic: How civil society organizations advocated for rights and better policies" Available at https://www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/argentina

for young people, they observe many alarms because it is a type of employment that comes hand in hand with a completely biased gender training."[16] `People are always surprised when I'm working. I try to tell them that my gender does not define what I am capable of doing.´says 20-year-old Yamila.

About 800 km away from Villa 20, in José de La Quintana, a mountain village in the province of Córdoba, QuintanaLibre was created, a community internet network that connects more than 70 families and has been sustained for over 11 years. Virginia Sosa, a member of the experience, shares in the documentary "Communities Making the Internet"[17] that she felt the "need to be a little more autonomous and to be able to learn, understand how it works, and in case I need it, to be able to solve it without waiting for someone else to solve it for me."

In La Perla, neighborhood of Alta Gracia, also in the province of Córdoba, a group of women organized themselves to carry out various ventures. They recently added the project of developing an internet access network for their community. Today, there are 9 women within the community network project, and they are an example of the necessary learning process to carry out the experience. The La Perla community is one of the 15 communities that participated in the "Seedbed of Community Networks" for applicants to the Roberto Arias Program,[18] coordinated by AlterMundi, with the support of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the 48% organization.

The Seedbed is an experience of collective training, development, and education that accompanies communities in the process of designing and gestating a community network. There are several organizations that have a prominent role and predominance of women's participation, and there are many instances in which gender perspectives and the possibility of careful review of how to ensure women's participation come into play. In one of the virtual meetings, the women of La Perla shared their hand-drawn sketch, painted with colors and with the points chosen for the network. This group of women involved in the project reflects on the new space they are occupying and the learning that it entails. "We always thought that those were things for men, and women do women's things. But now we do them to learn and to do something that is a job. Women also participate in what is within our reach."[19]

The participation of women in the processes of learning, building, and maintaining community networks is a challenge that needs to be addressed. Historical gender roles come into play, including caregiving responsibilities that cannot be easily reassigned and in which women are

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[16] Carrete, M. (29 Julio 2022) "Una red de wifi propia en Villa 20 instalada por mujeres". Suplemento Las12 del diario Página 12. Available at https://www.pagina12.com.ar/440366-una-red-de-wifi-propia-en-villa-20-instalada-por-mujeres
[17] AlterMundi (March 14, 2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcOAePVwafs&t=666s
[18] The Roberto Arias Program is an ENACOM program that allocates funds from the Universal Service to community network deployment projects.
[19] Nodo TAU (2022) Report 7 / Ellas entretejiendo redes inclusivas en el Semillero. Available at https://tau.org.ar/notas/relatoria-7-ellas-entretejiendo-redes-inclusivas-en-el-semillero/

often pigeonholed. It is necessary to create and maintain strategies that are sensitive to gender perspectives and that allow us to understand why women face obstacles to participating.

"Technical training sessions, such as network cable assembly, are one of the spaces that allow us to harmonize domestic, family, community, and technical aspects. They bring into play two central aspects that need to be reconsidered in terms of how women contribute to building networks. On the one hand, women must be explicitly invited to participate, and on the other hand, they must have conditions that take into account their realities," notes the report from the Seedbed, which focuses on gender issues in the experience.[20]

"Understanding the conditions that prevent women from becoming involved in this process is the first step toward creating appropriate dynamics. Sometimes women want to participate and cannot, or they want to participate but no one has asked them if they want to. Sometimes they are excluded from the outset of the invitation. For example, if the invitation is too technical, it may not be inviting, says Jésica Giudice, a member of AlterMundi and coordinator of the Seedbed experience. Reinforcing the invitation to review every detail, Jésica recommends, for example, that women not be assigned the task of cooking during the sessions. "Sometimes they are put in that role, and sometimes they put themselves there. The woman in charge of the kitchen does not necessarily have to be pigeonholed into cooking. She can join the training session to learn while someone else cooks that day."

Other aspects to consider include the socially assigned caregiving role that women often have. "There should be at least someone who can take care of the children for a while, spaces for boys and girls, a blanket on the floor with toys, and if we are in the park, we should be close to the playground. If resources allow, there should even be someone dedicated to this care. The invitation should take this into account."

There are multiple manifestations of oppression that women suffer in their involvement with digital environments: from being denied access to technology since childhood, to its corollary in the scarce representation of women in technological careers. This is also reflected in the low participation of women in all kinds of work and reflection spaces around technology. In daily tasks, in many cases, women's work remains invisible or is taken for granted. In addition to suffering gender prejudices towards community organizers or technologists, labeling them as "exotic," stereotyped, or underestimating their knowledge and abilities just because they are women.[21]

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[20] Nodo TAU (2022) "Relatoría 7 / Ellas entretejiendo redes inclusivas en el Semillero". Available at https://tau.org.ar/notas/relatoria-7-ellas-entretejiendo-redes-inclusivas-en-el-semillero/

[21] Zanolli, B. and el Khoury, C. (2019) "Women's enlightened journey through community networks" Available at https://genderit.org/es/feminist-talk/edicion-especial-viaje-ilustrado-de-mujeres-por-las-redes-comunitarias

Sometimes these limitations are expressed not with the intention of excluding but from the assumption that women must be cared for because they are fragile and weak. The Semillero offers multiple examples of this, such as tensions around performing certain heavy tasks or climbing the tower, for example. `Noticing these types of situations and finding proposals to solve them is something that is learned from observation and dialogue, ´ emphasizes Jésica. `Giving space to talk about these things. Paying attention to the level of participation of people who dared to come with their children. Inquiring about what prevents them from participating and how their participation can be facilitated.´ The Semillero deepens these observations. A methodology promoted during face-to-face meetings is rotating people, that is, inviting the group to ensure that all its members can perform all tasks, paying attention to the rotation of roles, especially when someone expresses fear or does not assume certain tasks because of shyness or timidity. "The slogan was to avoid the 'let me do it' and invite everyone to say, 'do you want to do it?' These types of dynamics show that expanding one's perspective and sensitizing inclusion of women also collaborates with the inclusion of everyone, even those who retract from participation and assuming certain roles for other personal or social aspects.

The experience of the Semillero also shows that some specific activities, such as manual tasks - the assembly of the network cable or soldering - and also some logistics tasks are becoming a more familiar place for women in communities. `The network cable is a cable made up of 8 thin filaments that must be carefully manipulated and organized inside a small plug. In general, women are more efficient in assembling network cables, perhaps because they have smaller hands or better fine motor skills. It is also common for women to solder better than men. There are cases of companies that prefer women for these tasks because they do them better. There are also logistics and maintenance tasks, long-term planning, monitoring, agenda generation, definition of routines, and methodologies, which are mainly supported by women. This does not mean that men cannot do them well. We have seen this in community experiences. That is why we recommend to communities that have not yet achieved it, to incorporate women into their network dynamics and do so intensely, ´ suggested Jessica in one of the Semillero meetings that delved into gender analysis.

Spaces to raise their voices, tell their stories, and project the future
Patriarchy knows no borders. Talking about care work as a gender assigned role and as an obstacle to women's participation and leadership in community networks is also narrated in the experience of the Marrecas community in Brazil, told by Aline Lima for genderit.org: "In community network workshops, female participation was always very low. Women were only in the majority when there were parties because they were the ones preparing the food and decoration and doing the cleaning in the end."[22]

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[22] Lima, Aline (2021) Domestic work and lack of women's leadership in Community Networks.
Networks. Available at
https://genderit.org/es/feminist-talk/trabajo-domestico-y-falta-de-liderazgo-de-las-mujeres-en-las-redes-community
networks

Network projects are not only an opportunity for self-managed and economic connectivity for communities but also spaces for training and social appropriation of technology and enablers of constructions of networks of experiences and people.

"The rescue of women's stories must be urgently considered in all possible times and spaces. The communication of their needs, expectations, and desires must be discussed and presented far beyond the discussions proposed by the main media, which assert that the natural place of women is in the home with family and household care, and not the labor market, politics, studying, or entrepreneurship."[23]

While patriarchal systems benefit from the exclusion and isolation of women and gender dissidents, the feminist and community response is the strengthening of networks. Exchanging stories, traditions, and experiences with technology are instances that strengthen voices and practices, to be visible and part of the collective and technological experience. The report cited on "Women's Circles that Ground and Sustain Community Networks"[24] reflects how "some women have recreated these spaces in different space-times where the depth of connections and technologies are constantly questioned or returned to their roots. After all, advances in communication technology allow us to 'connect as humans' and 'relationships and intimacy are what really matter'. How are we making our connections matter?"[25]

Challenges: Community Networks for Everyone

Thinking about the transversality of the gender perspective throughout the entire process and work of community networks leads us to reflect on the also invisibilized place of dissident gender identities in communities. It is also necessary to promote and incentivize their participation with specific inclusion strategies. It is vital and a fundamental part of a gender perspective on community work to make visible their unique and situated experience, which is surely different from that of cisgender women.

A feminist perspective on community networks also involves identifying what is needed to ensure that women are involved, as well as transgender people and/or excluded LGBTTIQ+ community members due to the hegemonic performance of masculinity in most spaces.

In the Feminist Principles for the Internet,[26] which aim to "work towards empowering more women and queer people - in all our diversity - to fully enjoy our rights, participate in pleasure

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[23] Lima, Aline. (2021) Op.
[24] Cynthia el Khoury y Kathleen Diga. Genderit.org (2019)
https://genderit.org/es/editorial/circulos-de-mujeres-que-fundamentan-y-sostienen-redes-comunitarias
[25] Cynthia el Khoury y Kathleen Diga (2019) Op. cit.
[26] APC MMP (2016- updated September 2022)
https://www.apc.org/es/pubs/principios-feministas-para-internet-version-2

and play, and dismantle patriarchy," the internet is defined as a *transformative political space that enables new forms of citizenship*. It also proposes to challenge the patriarchal spaces and processes that control internet governance and include more feminists and queer people in decision-making as a way to democratize spaces and policies.[27]

Cynthia el Khoury and Kathleen Diga invite us to think, from the definition of governance, how the construction of community networks "constantly enables questioning who is and who is not in the room when decisions are made about access points, purpose, and usability of connectivity." Community networks push us to reflect and ask ourselves "what are the values that shape governance models?" From the experience of the women's circle held during the LocNet 2022 meeting in Colombia, Jésica Giudice adds that "it is not enough for women to participate in meetings or for there to be a percentage of women present. It is necessary for women to be trusted to make decisions about the construction of spaces (participatory or not), the dynamics that sustain spaces, meetings, forums. That feminist women design communication guidelines, participation, timing, and location of participants."[28]

Community experiences become constellations for collectively and situatedly thinking about other possible worlds. Rethinking communication and technologies allows us to problematize them as power relations and, at the same time, think about the construction of sovereignty over them and that "it is possible to generate other traces, find particular ways of understanding and appropriating them."[29]

Methodological experiences for the collective creation and implementation of community networks, such as the Community Networks Seedbed in Argentina and other experiences such as Community Tech, in Mexico, generate a community of knowledge exchange, where training "is based not on the technology itself, but rather in community values and principles".[30] They create spaces for meeting, education, and promotion of rights for communities and, in particular, for those working in community communication, accompanying the birth of networks. These processes are nourished by territorial experiences, diversity of knowledge, and ways of sharing knowledge, respecting the space and margin for assuming the review and reflection of the practices of everyone, in benefit of the community itself. It is worth noting that these spaces and training strategies for communities are inspired, based on, and developed following the experiments and contributions of popular education as a methodology related to the opening of spaces, inclusion, and appropriation of knowledge. Popular education, from its origins proposed by Paulo Freire to the experiences that continue to walk that path today, affirms itself in the

[27] APC (Published 2016. Updated 2023) Feminist Principles for the Internet. Version 2.
https://www.apc.org/es/pubs/principios-feministas-para-internet-version-2
[28] AlterMundi. About the Locnet 2022 Meeting in Colombia.
https://AlterMundi.net/2022/11/17/encuentro-locnet-202227)
[29] Redes AC (2021) "Technological autonomy as constellations of experiences" APC
https://www.redesac.org.mx/_files/ugd/68af39_ef82b4d8a6a445918217a42d8a1028a6.pdf
[30] AC Networks (2021)

democratization of the word, the empowerment of all, and the construction of knowledge by adding all perspectives. In this sense, popular education and the gender perspective promoted by popular feminisms in communities strengthen links, focus, and goals, and embrace the experiences of community networks.

Community internet networks are much more than an infrastructure for accessing and sharing the internet. They are also experiences of communication, organizational processes, and management of technologies in favor of the dreams, desires, needs, and problems of communities. "They are above all a network of people, which promotes the autonomy of the community and its members, guaranteeing the right to communication and freedom of expression. However, to promote well-being and good living, it is necessary to respect local knowledge and culture while ensuring respect for diversity and equality for all."[31]

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[31] Lima, A. (2021) Domestic work and lack of women's leadership in Community Networks.
Available at
https://genderit.org/es/feminist-talk/trabajo-domestico-y-falta-de-liderazgo-de-las-mujeres-en-las-redes-community
networks