



UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs
Seminar Four: ICTs as Tools for Bridging the Gender Digital Divide
and Women's Empowerment
2-14 September 2002

Looking Behind the Internet:
Empowering Women for Public Policy Advocacy in Central America

By Juliana Martínez and Katherine Reilly

... there has been very little research done to understand the information needs of women- in terms of the strategic information they wish to receive or produce. A knowledge sharing model which puts women in a greater control over the kind of information they need and produce becomes fundamental to the empowerment for women.
(Nath 2001)

I. INTRODUCTION

Research on the incorporation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) into Central American public institutions and policy has found that the resulting changes are not focused on promoting gender equity or on increasing opportunities for women (Martinez and Gomez 2001). Instead, "e-government" initiatives have focused primarily on modernizing government administration and service provision, and promoting e-commerce (Reilly 2002a&b). Current research in Costa Rica and Nicaragua is based on the notion that the dominant approach to gender and ICTs mirrors the dominant approach to e-government in which women are viewed as individual recipients and users rather than organized actors.

The authors are part of the research team currently conducting a project with Fundación Acceso of Costa Rica on "Public Information for Public Policy Advocacy: Action Research with Women's Organizations in Costa Rica and Nicaragua", sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (Martínez 2002a). The project looks at the role of public information, information systems, and ICTs in mediating state-civil society relations. Gender issues and the work of organized women are used as the backdrop for this study. A particular focus of the work is the production and distribution (or lack thereof) of "public information," meaning data concerning governmental decisions, performance and the impact of government actions on the population, regardless of who produces this information, which rightfully belongs in the public domain (Martínez 2002c).

A primary hypothesis is that access to public information is a key ingredient for the participation of civil society organizations and social movements in the shaping of public policy. Additionally, ICTs may play a key role in improving access to public information. But the possibility of ‘access’ can only be taken advantage of insofar as organizations are capable of demanding what kind of information they require, how they need the information to be presented, and what concrete means would help them access it. Because this is a work in progress, so far it has generated many more questions than answers, but some interesting hypothesis are emerging.

Certain core ideas behind this research differentiate it from other efforts in the area of gender and ICTs. First, the primary focus is on **women and policy**, rather than on ICTs. As a result, the agenda is not ensuring that women have access, or studying their activities in the virtual world. Instead, the focus is on women’s needs and concerns in the real (offline) world, and how public information and ICTs can contribute to solutions. Thus, the identification and analysis of problems comes first – the technology is just one of many possible means to facilitate changes that address the problem. Additionally, this means that the focus is not on ICT policy, or affirmative action or gender action plans in creating ICT policy. Rather, the focus is on the role of ICTs and information in the political arena that is policy process, something that we call “**ICTs in policy**”. This differentiates the approach from those that focus on ensuring “the inclusion of gender concerns in national IT [information technology] policy, as most developing countries are either in the process of or about to start elaborating these policies” (Hafkin and Taggart 2001).

An implication of this focus is that women are not just users, recipients, consumers, or individuals making use of ICTs or receiving information, but *organized (i.e., collective) political actors (as opposed to individual user)* seeking to participate in policy and decision making processes. Thus, the focus is not on women at large, but on organized women who can use public information as an input to their agendas, and put it to the service of women at large. And, when thinking about the Internet, the focus of attention is often on the information appearing on a web browser, rather than the information systems, often built around ICTs, which generate the information. To the contrary, in realizing this work, both the decision-making processes and information processing systems behind the information which appears on the Internet, and the information itself, are being considered.

These starting points reflect the difference between the dominant approach to ICTs for development and an alternative approach (Martinez 2001; FUNREDES 2002). In the dominant approach, the focus is on connectivity, particularly on facilitating individual rather than collective use, and ICTs are seen as the solution to closing the so-called “digital divide”. An alternative approach recognizes that access alone does not ensure that the technology will have a positive impact. In this view, the digital divide is the result of existing social and economic divides. ICTs are seen as a tool with the potential to empower groups to close existing social divides but they are not the only solution, nor are they the entire solution. Without addressing the underlying political and social divides, ICT for development projects cannot be expected to close the digital divide. The same can be said for the particular instance of gender differentials as a social divide. In terms of gender differentials, as per Gajjala and Mamidipudi (1999: 8),

There are two questions of central importance: First, will women in the South be able (allowed) to use new technologies under conditions that are contextually empowering to them, because they

are defined by women themselves? Second, within which Internet-based contexts can women from the South truly be heard? How can they define the conditions under which they can interact on-line, to enable them to form coalitions and collaborate, aiming to transform social, cultural, and political structures?

Here the first question reflects social divides, while the second focuses on the gender digital divide. According to Tauli-Corpuz (1999: 98):

Women are not mere users or consumers of technology and information. They are appropriate creators, shapers, and producers of technology and also providers of information. If we have to make an impact analysis of technology we should look not only at its end use but all the phases of its development and use. This means making a full real-cost accounting of the technology. We also have to look at the social, political and cultural context in which these technologies are developed and used.

While we agree with these statements, we are concerned that this is not reflected in current government policy with regards to ICTs or the role of ICTs in mediating state-civil society relations. Tauli-Corpuz goes on to suggest that the women's movement must "Promote effective participation of women throughout the process of developing information systems, from determination of needs to system design, access, management and control" (ibid.). However, little has been done to advance this agenda. The project is seeking concrete ways to understand how the agenda can be advanced, and we have chosen to do it working together with women leaders involved in policy advocacy.

II. GENDER AND ICTs: Understanding State-Civil Society Relations

Before addressing the specific concerns of organized women, this section explains how we understand the interface between state and civil society. "ICTs in policy" implies addressing advocacy agendas for changing the (often contested) interaction between the state and civil society. Organized women can - and in fact currently are seeking to - change the way in which they relate with the state by changing the information and communication flows (or lack of) that nourish this interaction. This section will describe how the state, and the state-civil society interface, are understood in this document.

Central American governments are rapidly incorporating ICTs into their own work, and are also establishing the conditions for ICT use nationally. Costa Rica, the most advanced country in the region in terms of state policy intervention on ICTs, has established a "National Digitalization Agency" to coordinate and focus its 10 years worth of work in this area. El Salvador, a highly minimalist state, has participated in several arms-length initiatives dealing with national digitalization. The Nicaraguan and Guatemalan states have focused more on wiring the government agencies and putting them online, but in both countries government is also participating in many scattered Internet initiatives.

A survey of government ICT use in Central America conducted recently established a framework for looking at state ICT use from the perspective of civil society. (Reilly 2002a). State ICT initiatives are often labelled "e-government" or "digital democracy", however these terms are vague and sometimes confusing. From the perspective of civil society, (and setting aside the activities of other actors), *government* ICT activities can be divided into e-government, e-governance and e-democracy, three inter-related concepts. **E-government** is the use of ICTs by governments to modernize the state. **E-governance** is the use of ICTs by governments to improve the ability of government to aggregate societal demands and to identify solutions. It is associated with ICT structures that are implemented to

suit the government's purposes and to facilitate the ability of the government to manage the state. **E-democracy** is the use of ICTs to facilitate citizen participation in democratic processes through the improvement of transparency, accountability, and access to information. Because democracy by definition comes from the people, e-democracy is not primarily the domain of governments. However, governments certainly can and do affect e-democracy when they are using ICTs to facilitate the ability of all societal actors, including organized women, to participate in the management and governance of the state (Reilly 2002b). In the case of the women's movement, government ICT use can promote e-democracy by facilitating the production and distribution of public information that allows for more effective *offline* policy monitoring and advocacy activities around issues of interest to women.

1. E-government and E-governance

The above-mentioned study looked at 5 different countries in Central America, each with different state-society relationship and different state structures. However, despite this, it was found that, overall, the focus of activities in the region is consistently on e-government for modernization of the state. Within these activities, a heavy emphasis is placed on updating internal administrative systems so that government services, and information about them, can be digitalized and placed online.

E-governance has focused on finding solutions for business concerns. In particular, government e-commerce activities in this area have concentrated on getting micro, small and medium business (SMEs, including tourism) online, and providing on-line spaces to grease the wheels of international trade or to foster national business linkages. Universal access and education initiatives are also found throughout the region. However, there is a link between these and projects aimed at enabling e-commerce and e-services provision. For example, in Costa Rica, government officials claim that there is a vicious cycle in which a lack of on-line information leads to a lack of Internet use. This results in a negative incentive for Internet use by SMEs, which undermines e-commerce. The government is tackling this by putting government services online, lowering the costs of connectivity, and providing public access points. Universal access initiatives will allow citizens get connected to the Internet, while education initiatives encourage citizens to become 'users' of the medium. This, it is thought, will create an incentive for e-commerce.

The flip side of these findings is that the *focus* of e-governance in the region is *not* on making fundamental changes in the sets of demands that governments are aggregating. In particular, ICTs are not being used to facilitate the aggregation of the demands of the less privileged members of society. Where governments have considered gender issues, it has been in terms of programmes that ensure women's access to the Internet, projects to put information online directed at women (such as women's health information), or ICT education for girls. While these are important initiatives, they focus on individual (rather than organized) women's access to and use of the technology – but they do not address decision-making processes around how and what public information of interest to **women as actors**, is being produced. And the finding makes sense: how could electronic means contribute to the aggregation of social demands which governments themselves are not currently considering?

The upshot of these findings is that, when e-government and e-governance are strong, privileged groups in society have an enormous advantage as compared to the rest of the population, since they already participate of the political networks that determine what appears on the Internet. Moreover, they have access to the technology. On the other hand, where e-government and e-governance are

weak, as is the case in Central America, disadvantaged groups are made worse off by the lack of access to government channels for agenda setting. In either case, Internet does not seem to be helping governments listen to their constituencies.

In terms of organized women, weak e-government and e-governance can mean that groups have less capacity to advocate change. While stronger government administration could benefit organized women, there is little evidence of government programming that seeks to actively shift the balance between those who benefit from public information or government ICT use, and those who do not. These issues are being explored in the current research.

2. E-democracy

Overall, the incorporation of ICTs into government activities in Central America is being done with little reflection on how to broaden the basis of democratic structures. ICTs are being used to provide superficial information, or information that does not respond to the needs of organized women. For example, government agencies put public image websites online in response to pressures to improve access to information. But, governments are not using ICTs to increase the ability of marginalized groups to participate in the public policy process.

This parallels the findings of Jenkins and Goetz (1999) who challenge the access to information for anti-corruption movement as: 1) overemphasizing the role of the state in the solution, 2) failing to recognize the role of civil society in combating corruption, and 3) having a limited concept of the relationship between information and accountability. As they say, “[i]n spelling out the means by which information can lead to accountability, *the emphasis is on relatively uncontroversial forms of information*. It thus has much in common with the recent attempts by politicians and bureaucrats in India to *pre-empt radical change by unveiling (and loudly trumpeting) their own rather tame transparency initiatives*. These tend to center on village-level ‘information kiosks’...” (emphasis added). Generally, neither the needs of women as individuals, nor those of organized women, are taken into account in information production or information system design, even in policy areas traditionally directed at women (e.g., domestic violence, family planning). Nor are they considered in the production of information outputs.

Here it is important to reflect on the meaning of transparency. The problem is that the term transparency is frequently abused – especially given the anti-corruption movement. One way of getting at the heart of transparency is to separate out “clarity”. When publishing websites and putting services online, governments often claim that they are becoming more ‘transparent’, when in reality, what they are doing is becoming more “clear”. That is, the government’s structure and service offerings are made clear to individual citizens, and this makes it easier to understand and manoeuvre through the bureaucracy. In other instances, governments publish information that makes their activities more transparent – the information allows citizens to know, understand, and make value judgments about the activities of the state, as well as to affect change. While clarity is important – and useful – to the individual woman, transparency is key for organized women.

This take on the issue suggests that *all* information published by a government tells us *something* about its activities, and helps us to make judgements. But some types of information are

more useful than other types in making judgements. Adding to this, transparency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for accountability:

Accountability = information (transparency) + sanction and reward mechanisms.

We can value the usefulness of public information directed at citizens in terms of the following measures: complete, updated, timely, valid, verifiable, and incorporating the effects of public policy on the social and economic situations at hand. But even if information is highly ‘useful’, without properly functioning sanctions and rewards, access to information cannot lead to accountability.

Expanding on this point: in Central America, states and public policy are weak in terms of vertical accountability (state-society accountability). Vertical accountability is both the publication of information that explains decisions or actions, as well as mechanisms to sanction inappropriate activities. Improving accountability involves more than putting data on web pages, it also involves changing organizational and political structures and processes. In this regard the work of Jenkins and Goetz (1999) is instructive. They point out that transparency does not automatically result in accountability but rather this term can be useful “as a euphemism for ‘means of combating corruption’”, allowing government policy makers and aid agencies to avoid openly admitting the existence of corruption. They go on to say that the transparency and anti-corruption movement is “so much repackaged liberal-pluralist theory” which “does nothing to address existing power inequalities.” We learn from this that, not only must information systems must be set up or modified to produce the required information, but also political processes must be changed to ensure the existence of the sanctions and rewards that make accountability function.

An empowering approach to ICT use in democracy building would focus on methodologies to bridge with closed state institutions. In this conceptualization, women are political actors who use, or seek to use, public information and their understanding of information systems as monitoring, policy advocacy and accountability tools. But, lacking an agenda to incorporate ICTs into governance and democracy building, the incorporation of ICTs into government and public policy creates digital divides which reinforce existing political divides and power differentials. By thinking about how ICTs can facilitate access to strategic public information, women’s organizations can advocate fundamental changes in the public service to make it more participatory and responsive to the strategic and immediate needs of women and the women’s movement.

III. THE PROJECT

In order to make ICTs more responsive to gender advocacy goals, the project (Public Information for Public Policy Advocacy: Action Research with Women’s Organizations in Costa Rica and Nicaragua) will use an action research approach to study organized women’s efforts to look behind the Internet and turn public institutions inside out so that they respond to citizen information needs. As such, the project will pursue a cycle of problem definition, strategic planning, advocacy and evaluation around questions such as: What are the government information systems that accompany the implementation of public policies? How can they better respond to the strategic information needs of

women? What are the implications of information systems for organizational structures and existing public policies? And, what role can ICTs play?

Given these questions, the **primary goals** of this research are to:

- determine whether women's organizations have access to public information that is relevant for policy advocacy,
- identify the primary shortcomings in this vein, and
- explore strategies to overcome these obstacles.

The research involves key women's organizations and leaders in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. These range from local to national, as well as community to research oriented, and all form part of the national women's movements. The groups participating represent about 40 per cent of all women's organizations conducting policy advocacy at the national level in each country. An intentionally-designed (rather than random) **sample** also includes leaders from all networks and coalitions currently operating: Agenda Política de las Mujeres, Consejo de los 12 Puntos and Foro Autónomo de las Mujeres in Costa Rica; the Red Nacional de Mujeres contra la Violencia and Comité Nacional Feminista in Nicaragua. Altogether, we can confidently say that the project is reaching the core of the women's movements in each country.

An action-research approach was chosen for this study in order to tightly link study process and results on the one hand, with political practice on the other. This qualitative research **methodology** draws on Strauss' (1987) grounded theory approach. The methodology is an inductive framework, in which raw data is built into categories, relationships and eventually exploratory theoretical statements, which in turn can be used for the generation of new data sets.

A strategic planning methodology developed by Fundación Acceso lies at the centre of the **data-gathering** strategy. The adaptation of this planning methodology for political processes is, in itself, one of the outputs of this work. It mirrors the grounded theory approach while taking participants through a process of reflection on their long-term political project and the design of strategies to realize change. It creates the space for collective self-reflection as well as ideas for transforming the current situation.

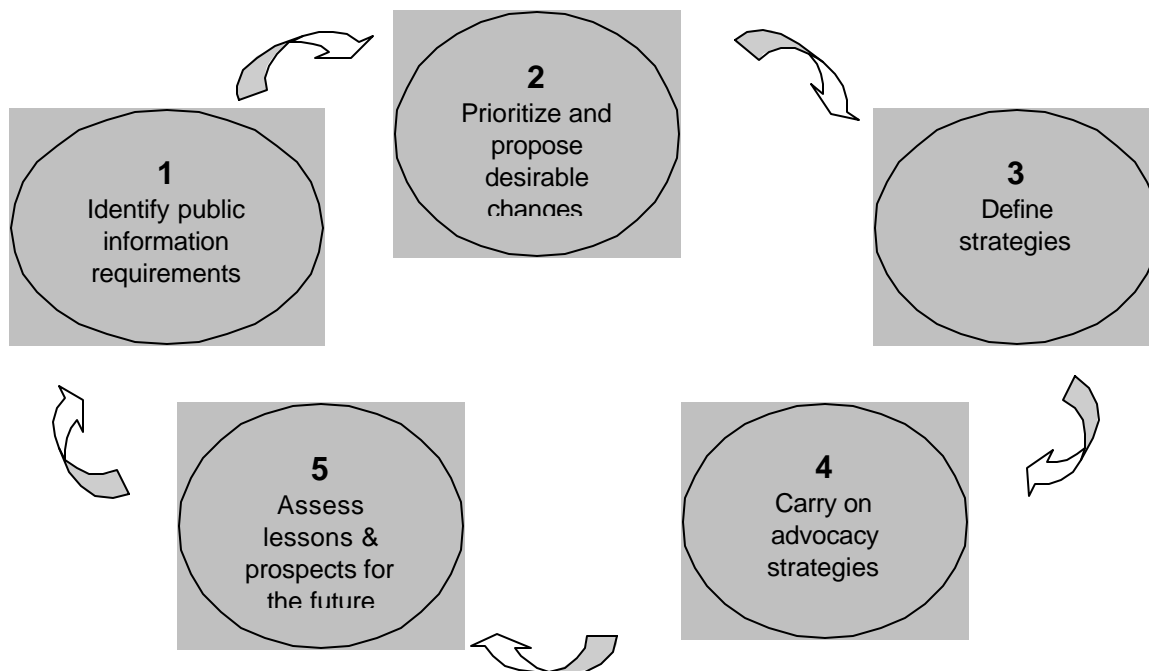
Another source of data, which supports the strategic planning exercises, is the analysis of public information systems, using another technique developed by Fundación Acceso (Camacho 2002). We are currently investigating the interface between women's organizations and public policy by analyzing the public information systems in place in state agencies. This analysis involves mapping information flows both between and within the state and civil society. The maps of each group are drawn separately based on how both public officials and organized women *perceive* information flows, and then they are compared to identify major differences. Points of divergence can then become the basis of advocacy agendas. The process is viewed as a tool that could improve strategic planning to advocate access to public information.¹

¹ For an example of the application of this approach see Reilly 2002c. The results of this mini-study showed that in Costa Rica, the implementation of the Law on Domestic Violence involves several institutions and victims often visit several offices during their trajectory through the system. As they leave one office, they are given references to remit at the next. These offices could publish statistics about the number of new people entering the system, the number

These two data gathering methodologies are also complemented by more traditional research methods including individual interviews, and case studies on the role of public information in recent examples of policy advocacy attempts.

Figure 1 below shows the current stage of research in relation to the cycle that will be followed in the course of the entire project. This paper draws from data gathered in step 1, targeted at identifying public information requirements among women participating in the project. But, given the grounded theory methodology, based on stage 1, areas for action for stage 2 are beginning to emerge.

Figure 1: Research Cycle



So far, two collective meetings have been realized in each country, as well as a first round of individual interviews. The empirical evidence for this paper is based on preliminary findings concerning public information requirements among women organizations in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua. By the same token, comparisons between the two countries are preliminary, and we have avoided stating conclusions of this kind in this document. The full project has a target end date of August 2003.

of people they send to each other offices, and the number they receive from each other office. In this way, the number of people who never make it through the system, as well as the trajectory taken by victims, could be pinpointed. The ideal would be a web-based system to keep track of each individual's case in a centralized file, but in the mean time, use of basic software to track data, and publication of basic statistics on a website once a year would have a large impact in terms of e-democracy. With this information, the civil society organizations that advocated domestic violence legislation could better understand the implementation of the law and advocate improvements in implementation.

IV. FINDINGS TO DATE

Drawing from 16 individual interviews and 2 collective workshops we have been able to identify women's major concerns and needs in terms of public information. So far, perceptions have been fairly homogeneous among women in each country as well as between countries.

1. Obstacles concerning public information

Interviewees were asked, "What are the primary obstacles you face in terms of public information?" Responses revolved around three kinds of obstacles. The first refers to the availability of relevant public information, which we refer to as **access**. The second challenge has to do with knowing what to do with information once available or, in other words, problems of **use**. Yet a third challenge involves **appropriation**, that is, the ability to translate public information into policy advocacy. Below we refer in more detail to each of these matters, providing examples from the women interviewed.

a. Access

"the information is not accurate"

"there isn't access to many documents"

"we go straight to trading favours to access information"

"there is manipulation of information"

"information is fragmented, compartmentalized"

Access refers to whether women can readily count on complete, timely, verifiable and reliable information. Women in Costa Rica and Nicaragua do not currently have access to public information with these characteristics. In fact, access to public information is a scarce resource among women as well as men. What access there is largely depends on personal contacts and informal mechanisms, but given differentials in resources and power, as well as cultural biases, this means that organized women have less access than men.

Access is, most definitely, a key bottleneck in women's policy advocacy. Public information is hardly available and when it is, it is incomplete, unreliable, outdated, fragmented, and usually not gender disaggregated. Besides, actual information outcomes should involve raw data, indicators, and reports. Our research also indicates that in addition to the frequent lack of available public information, organized women do not necessarily know how public agencies work and what mechanisms might be available to channel relevant public information.

Access problems involve not only women's own technical and political capacities but also, relations between the state and civil society. In both countries, key obstacles to accessing public information identified by women included:

- That it is not framed as a right for all citizens
- That it is a power resource
- That state officials handle information as if it were their own

b. Use

"we do not share information"

"we do not have a culture of information"

Use has to do with the capacity to manipulate and interpret public information. Women interviewed feel strongly about their limitations in this area. Partly, this is due to how information is presented (language, specialization, hard copies of very complex and lengthy information). However, in part, the problems in use are due to the lack of skills to apply the information to the primary objective at hand.

For instance, Nicaraguan women point out that they require a more creative use of information and improved capacities for analysis of the scarce public information to which they do have access. Similarly, Costa Rican women indicated that public information is not always shared among women themselves.

c. Appropriation

“we do not know how to use information for policy advocacy”

Appropriation refers to turning public information into policy advocacy, whether through lobbying, demonstrations, policy proposals, etc. Where women feel they lack capacities to properly use public information, they also feel challenged in their capacities to turn the little public information they have access to, into sound political action. Just as with use, we still need to explore why this is so. As yet, our research shows that organized women do not always have a clear sense of what kind of information they need in order to make political claims.

For instance, Nicaraguan women said they have a difficult time identifying what public information is most relevant for policy advocacy. An important goal is to identify the particular formatting and content needs of women’s groups as well techniques for appropriation. It is also interesting to note that, lacking the ability to appropriate public information either due to access or capacity constraints, women’s groups are at a disadvantage for improving their access to information in the first place.

Most literature on ICTs, gender-related or otherwise, focuses on only one component of what we see as important to benefiting from ICTs - access. Yet, in the context of this research, women repeatedly point to these three key aspects of their relation with information, which call for strengthening various capacities, including yet transcending, access, use and appropriation of the technology itself.

At this current phase of our action-research the emphasis will be in learning how to improve access rather than use and appropriation capacities. For this purpose, in each of the two countries we will choose two cases of policy advocacy, one success story and one failure. In each case we will reconstruct the role played by public information and the specific information-related mechanisms at work in advocating policy change. However, behind the scenes, the research and data gathering methodologies are contributing to the development of methodologies that women’s groups will be able to apply to the use and appropriation of public information. Furthermore, many elements of access are determinants of use and appropriation. Below we explore access in more detail.

2. Processes behind access to public information

Among access problems, women’s perceptions point in three parallel and complementary directions. First, obstacles relate to the **production** of public information including the selection of indicators and the gathering of data. This stage is important for determining what kind of information

could be made available. That is, if doors are closed at this stage, certain types of information cannot be produced and disseminated later on. Secondly, obstacles relate to the **formatting** of public information, including analysis and production of reports. This stage determines whether women as “non-experts” in any given field can understand and use information. It is also a stage that reflects political decisions in data analysis. Finally, obstacles relate to the **dissemination** of public information, including the extent to which public information is made available to those who need it, as well as how it is disseminated.

Distinguishing among these processes is useful, both for the analysis as well as for developing strategies for change, since each of them involves specific stakeholders, resources, technical expertise, etc. Table 1 summarizes preliminary findings.

Table 1: Characteristics of public information according to women’s perceptions by country.		
How info is:	Costa Rica	Nicaragua
Produced (indicators, data gathering)	“...about activities but not their impact upon women’s lives” - Arbitrary information (carries through to formatting)	- poorly registered - outdated - activities are not known, no allocation of resources and benefits for women
Formatted (analysis, reporting)	“too aggregated” (e.g., by sex and age) - information is not understandable; requires specialists to interpret	- not systematized - too aggregated (e.g., by sex and age) - information is not understandable; requires specialists to interpret
Disseminated (to whom, in what format, and how)	- it is intentionally hidden - through informal mechanisms - depends on personal contacts - sometimes it costs money - information concerning where to find information is lacking - even offices aimed at protecting citizens do not disseminate information properly - it is not approached as a citizen’s right	- through informal mechanisms - depends on personal contacts - it is not approached as a citizen’s right
Sources: interviews April and May, 2002, in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, respectively, to a sample of 16 women; first workshop conducted in April and May 2002 in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, respectively. Fundación Acceso , 2002a & 2002b.		

As shown in Table 1, responses among countries are highly homogeneous. Later stages of this research will provide clues as to why. Note that this information is under production, and until it has been further processed, it will be difficult to identify differences between the two countries. Below we describe and provide examples for each process:

Production of public information - Public entities do not always elaborate the information that citizens need. Sometimes, the problem is in the indicators selected for the gathering of information (for example the gender of individuals who receive services). Other times, it has to do with the processing of data (for example, gender data is collected on paper, but it is not entered into computer databases and/or tabulated, and thus does not show up in public data sets).

Formatting of Public Information - Formatting difficulties begin with the analysis of the information collected (for example, gender disaggregated data is collected, but at the moment of analysis, tabulations do not present gender differentiated information). The analysis is closely linked to the presentation of information. In relation to this, civil society organizations repeatedly manifested the lack of simplicity and precision in public information.

For example, in the first Nicaraguan workshop, it was pointed out that what little information is available often requires specialists to ‘translate’. In this sense, the format in which information is presented can affect access; even though the information is produced and disseminated, it is still irrelevant and/or unintelligible to those who need it.

Dissemination of public information - The final process having to do with access is the actual dissemination of public information, dealing both with the information made available, and the mechanisms through which it can be accessed. In this latter category, we also include, where necessary, the technical support and processes required to have real access to information.

Currently, in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the women consulted found that access to information is through friendships, influence and other informal mechanisms. Also, it is principally through this type of mechanism that one finds out that information has been produced, and where to find it. Finally, much of the information that one discovers should be published, but in reality is not available to the general public.

3. Quality of public information

Another transversal dimension of the processes behind access to information is the quality of public information, an element that can be layered on top of production, formatting and dissemination. The women consulted stressed the low quality of information ‘end products,’ which has the effect of broadening the gap between the information needed and the information produced. Problems identified (Table 2) included:

Table 2: Quality of public information according to women's perception, by country		
Process	Costa Rica	Nicaragua
Completeness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fragmented - Atomized - Incomplete - One point in time - Actions, not results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scarce - Segregated - Fragmented, fractioned, disperse - Not sequential but one point in time
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biased - Small samples 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hardly reliable - Manipulated, biased - Sources lack legitimacy - Communities show something else
Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slow - After decisions have been made 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not timely
Sources : interviews April and May, 2002, in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, respectively, to a sample of 16 women; first workshop conducted in April and May 2002 in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, respectively. Fundación Acceso , 2002a & 2002b.		

V. CONCLUSIONS: EMERGING GROUNDED THEORY

From the data collected to date, the project has begun to generate some basic understandings of the role of ICTs and information in mediating the relationship between civil society and the state. These basic premises will form frameworks for the upcoming rounds of data-gathering workshops and interviews in the projects iterative process of building up grounded theory. Two of the findings are presented below.

1. Citizen Information Systems

The fact that the women contacted through the project were able to characterize and explain the shortcomings in public information shows that, in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, public information is available. But as both groups pointed out, this information is not perceived as belonging to citizens. A major problem resulting from this is that public information is not generated with the citizen in mind (*as decision-maker and political actor*). Instead, it is developed for use by decision-makers within state institutions. Public information is generated for the individual citizen, but for clarity purposes more than for transparency – see section II-2.

Following this line of thought, one of the areas of grounded theory emerging from the research is the difference between managerial information systems and citizen information systems, a divide that reflects the difference between e-government and e-democracy respectively, and highlights the important difference between transparency and clarity in public information. Civil society groups need to make clear to government their specialized information needs, as different from the information needs of public administrators. As per Martínez (2002b), “For civil society, a large problem in terms of building capacity in policy advocacy is access to citizen information that measures the “pulse” of public decisions and public performance.”

The very nature of information requires us to consider who will use it, and for what purposes. For example, in Costa Rica we found that the only statistics collected by Family and Domestic Violence Courts in relation to the Law No. 7586 Against Domestic Violence reflect the movement of cases through the system and the types of resolutions brought in these cases. Court administrators use this information to monitor the performance of judges and assure the timely realization of justice. This information system assures ‘good management’ and ‘good governance’ and of course, this is important to women and the women’s movement. However, the problem is that this information system does not produce data that can help explain issues of public concern such as why certain resolutions are reached, or what percentage of women vs. men are applying this domestic violence law. In other words, this information does not show us the effects, results and impacts on the social situations targeted by the policy, and therefore, the information does not capture the interface between society and public policy. In the case of Costa Rica, a very high proportion of cases are dropped before the sentencing stage, and there is no data produced which would help to shed light on why this might be. The women’s movement lobbied for the implementation of this law, but they have little data to use to monitor its impact.

The point is that there is a large difference between wanting to know how many women presented cases in different offices, in order to re-allocate human resources within the court system, and the characterizations of cases and the women who presented them, as well as the responses the system gave to these women, in order to learn whether cases were resolved “satisfactorily”.

Information produced for public administration may be difficult for women to use or understand, and therefore to appropriate in their policy agenda. Civil society thus needs to make clear to government their information needs so that contents can be formatted appropriately. And government has a responsibility for providing this information as part of its accountability commitments. For civil society, making information demands implies looking *behind* www.government.com, and identifying gaps or issues with the systems that produce public information.

The difference in information needs calls for research into the differences between managerial and citizen information systems. What characterizes a citizen information system? Can the same data be used by both systems? What responsibilities does this imply for state and for civil society institutions? Certainly, the assurance of access, use and appropriation will be important to the establishment of citizen information systems. Also, this research is important because it is one mechanism for establishing the interface between civil society and the state that will truly begin to establish e-democracy.

2. Enabling ICT Mediation of State-Civil Society Relations

We have explored the various types of problems that organized women face in accessing public information, a problem which sets them back in terms of being able to use and appropriate it in their policy advocacy activities. In both countries under study, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, there is no public policy aimed at providing citizens with public information suited to their needs. Many of the women leaders we have interviewed claim that access to public information depends on personal contacts and informal mechanisms, making access very unequal among women who have, and women who do not have access to these mechanisms. Additionally, there is no policy aimed at generating public information with a gender perspective, nor are statistics disaggregated by sex.

The lack of public information makes it harder for women to promote policy changes. The reason is simple: most of the time, public information is required to even make the argument that a policy change is needed. And regardless of how much women have developed their capacities to put ICTs to their service, (for example in networking and coalition building) the state is a primary implementer of programmes for women. The lack of production of meaningful and relevant information about women's programming produces a barrier to effective policy advocacy.

But as both groups pointed out, this information is not perceived as belonging to citizens. A major problem resulting from this is that the citizen (as decision-maker and political actor) is not in mind when public information is generated. Instead, it is developed for use by decision-makers within state institutions.

Women's groups need to begin producing agendas for changing information-related policies, but this requires an understanding of the public administration information systems behind the information that is produced, and this implies a need for new skills. For example, in order to request strategically significant changes in the production of statistics on domestic violence, it is important to understand the court system and the information systems used to generate statistics on domestic violence cases. We are working on methodologies to address these concerns.

Changing information production requires changes in policy. And policy does not come out of the blue, but results from politics. Research that addresses policy without acknowledging politics leaves us without clues as to how to get there. In order for ICTs to empower women, we need to be thinking about policy formation, including the various actors participating in policy making, their interests and agendas, as much as in the actual outcomes of policy women wish to accomplish. The interface between public policy and social movements is hardly explored, even in the United States, where academic and applied research is well developed (Meyer 2002).

In this regard, the work of Jenkins and Goetz (1999) is very refreshing. In pointing out that the right to information movement is elitist, and artificially separate from resource rights, they suggest that the "... nature and utility of rights are linked to the process by which they are obtained, and that the meaning of established democratic concepts can be transformed through political practice...". This point is particularly helpful in making the working link between transversal ICT or information advocacy agendas and other policy areas such as gender. And in reflecting on participatory development models, they suggest that grassroots information projects avoid direct confrontation between people's knowledge and official accounts. They go on to say, "It is hard to see how people's knowledge can translate into power without critical engagements with the bureaucracy, or exposure and prosecution of corrupt practices...".²

² This quote provides an effective basis from which to respond to Nath (2002) who expresses the following concern: "while [knowledge] networks have a strong role to play in enhancing (and sometimes creating) the space for women to impact the governance processes, not many such networks exist which are engendered to foster participation of women. ... In absence of engendered networks, the loop of empowerment which subsequently leads to participation in governance remains incomplete." As informed by Jenkins and Joetz (1999), we would suggest that knowledge networks are more focused on exchanging information than on conducting political action and bringing confrontation between people's knowledge and official accounts, and that until this occurs, just creating the conditions for women's participation in networks will not be enough.

But on the whole, as per Meyer (2002), scholars working on public policy and social movements acknowledge each other, and quietly incorporate each other's findings. The research described in this paper seeks to shed light on the relation between these two areas of study from the vantage point of public information. It is an area where more work is required.

Recognizing that existing social divides need to be closed in order to close the digital divide, people working on gender and ICTs should look at how ICTs can play a roll in political agendas. The first step towards having access to public information relevant for policy advocacy is to design advocacy strategies to claim the right to access public information. Before these strategies can even consider whether ICTs can pay any service to the cause, women will address what kind of information they need, how they need it to be presented, and what technical means will support it, whether it be the Internet, printed reports, etc.

Or, in the case of implementing information systems to generate regular reliable evaluations of government programming for women, achieving this policy goal is only half the battle. Putting in place sanctions to ensure that those in charge are made responsible is a political battle as well. Information systems are politically charged – they are not just a network of computers – they are sets of norms and webs of human interactions responding to a variety of interests. To change the policy of *how* information is generated, women will need to tackle the system. In short, putting cyberspace to the service of these women requires first, making improvements in the world that surrounds cyberspace.

In sum, this action-research seeks to empower women to use ICTs and realize ICT policy advocacy by working with women on:

- Placing public information systems in the context of state-civil society relations
- More readily understanding information systems and applications of ICTs
- Measuring the value of public information based on an understanding of where it comes from and how it is produced and disseminated
- Identifying key obstacles to the access, use and appropriation of public information
- Prioritizing possible solutions for the production of public information - solutions which may involve ICTs
- Appropriating public information in solutions for a wide range of social, economic and political problems

With these skills in hand, women can work together to challenge the dominant approach to government ICT use, and advocate fundamental changes in the public service that make it more participatory and responsive to the strategic and immediate needs of women and the women's movement.

References

- APC WNSP. 1999. "Information and Communication Technologies: A Women's Agenda." Prepared for the *43rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women*, March.
<http://www.apcwomen.org/work/policy/women-rights.html>
- Camacho, Kemly. 2001. "Internet: ¿una Herramienta para el Cambio Social? Elementos para una discusión necesaria" Fundación Acceso Publicaciones,
<http://www.acceso.or.cr/publica/telecom/conocimiento22.shtml> . Available in English at
<http://www.acceso.org.cr/publica/socialchange.shtml> .
- _____. 2002a. Information mapping methodology. Unpublished.
- _____. 2002b. *Trabajando la Internet con una vision social*. Fundación Redes y Desarrollo, OLISTICA. http://funredes.org/mistica/castellano/ciberoteca/tematica/esp_doc_olist.html .
- Fundación Acceso. 2002a. *Primer Taller de Planificación Estratégica Sobre Información para la Incidencia Política del Movimiento de Mujeres de Costa Rica*. San José: Fundación Acceso.
- _____. 2002b. *Primer Taller de Planificación Estratégica Sobre Información para la Incidencia Política del Movimiento de Mujeres Nicaragua*. San José: Fundación Acceso.
- Gajjala, R. and A. Mamidipudi. 1999. "Cyberfeminism, technology, and international 'development'." *Gender and Development*, Vol.7, No. 2.
- Gómez, Ricardo and Juliana Martínez. 2001. "Internet... Why? And what for?" IDRC/Fundación Acceso. www.acceso.or.cr/pppp
- Hafkin, Nancy and Nancy Taggart. 2001a. "Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study." USAID Office of Women in Development, June.
<http://www.usaid.gov/wid/pubs/it01.htm>
- _____. 2001b. "Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study." USAID Office of Women in Development, June. <http://www.usaid.gov/wid/pubs/hafnoph.pdf>
- Jenkins, R. and A. Goetz. 1999. "Accounts and accountability: theoretical implications of the right-to-information movement in India". *Third World Quarterly*, 20(3), pp.603.
- Johnson, Holly. 1996. "Methods of Measurement." *Dangerous Domains: Violence Against Women in Canada*. Toronto: Nelson Canada.
- Martínez, Juliana. 2002a. "Primer informe de avance: Información pública para la incidencia política de organizaciones de mujeres de Costa Rica y Nicaragua." San José: Fundación Acceso.
www.acceso.or.cr
- _____. 2002b. *Ideas para la discusión: ¿Qué pueden hacer las políticas públicas por la inclusión?* San José: Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos.
- _____. 2002c. "No toda información pública es ciudadana... ideas para la discusión". *Serie Sociedad Civil y Políticas Públicas*. San José: Fundación Acceso.
- Meyer, David. 2002. "Social Movements and Public Policy: Eggs, Chicken, and Theory." *Prepared for the Workshop "Social Movements, Public Policy and Democracy,"* Held at the University of California, Irvine, 11-13 January.

- Nath, vikas. 2002. "ICT enabled Empowerment-Governance Loop". Message posted to ICTNet – "a UN-INSTRAW mailing list devoted to gender aspects of ICTs". 11 September 2002.
http://server778.dnslive.net/mailman/listinfo/ictnet_un-instraw.org
- _____. 2001. "Empowerment and Governance through Information and Communication Technologies: women's perspective," KnowNet Initiative.
<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/knownet/articles/womenandICT.htm>
- Reilly, Katherine. 2002a. *Government, ICTs and Civil Society in Central America: Is National Government ICT Use Contributing to More Democratic States*. Toronto: CIDA/Fundación Acceso. <http://www.katherine.reilly.net/e-governance/reports.html>
- _____. 2002b. *Government ICT Use in Central America ... a View from Civil Society*. Toronto: CIDA/Fundación Acceso. <http://www.katherine.reilly.net/e-governance/reports.html>
- _____. 2002c. "Study of Public Information Systems and Costa Rica's Law No. 7586 Against Domestic Violence Internet and Society." *Series: Reflecting on public policies*. San Jose: Fundación Acceso.
- Sen, Purna. 1998. "Development practice and violence against women." *Gender and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 3.
- Strauss, Anselm. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. San Francisco: Cambridge University Press.
- Tauli-Corpuz, Victoria. 1999. "ICTs: Their Impact on Women and Proposals for a Women's Agenda." *Women in Action*, No. 2.
- Tilly, Charles. 1984. "Social Movements and National Politics", in Charles Birght and Susan Harding (eds) *Statemaking and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*. Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press.