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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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COSTA RICA

The ICT sector requires the full participation of women

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Introduction

When we talk about gender and technology, we cannot ignore women's participation in the information and communications technologies (ICT) sector. It is quite important to think about this theme from an equality and equity perspective, since Costa Rica has a dynamic and growing ICT sector. This is an economic opportunity sector for business ventures and constant growth. Men living in the main cities of the country have made the most of the opportunities generated by this sector, which can be said to result in a double exclusion for young women living in rural areas.

Women in the ICT sector

Costa Rica has had the capacity and infrastructure to support the development of ICT companies and business endeavours, among which we can mention national companies that develop software and a number of big international companies that have factories in the main cities in Costa Rica, such as Intel, IBM and Hewlett Packard. Some of the characteristics that attract international investors in the ICT sector are well-trained professionals able to speak different languages and the political stability of the country, among others. Based on these, a recent study by the international consultant Tholons identified the capital of Costa Rica, San José, as the third best city in Latin America to establish outsourcing of technological services.[1]

Nevertheless, if you take a look at the statistics for women's participation in the sector, you can assume that there are issues that result in their exclusion. There are only a few women studying majors related to technology. Once those women enter the workplace, you will find even fewer in specialised fields of work, and owning or managing technology companies.

A whopping 96.6% of professionals working in ICTs as their main economic activity are male, and only 3.4 % are female.[2] In management positions, 86.15% are male and only 13.85% female. In the Costa Rican ICT Chamber, only 9.6% of the companies are run by women. Regarding the academic sector, only 18% of the students doing ICT majors are female, compared to 82% male.

The low participation of women in the ICT industry has three main consequences:

- There is a high demand for professionals and technicians in the ICT sector that is not satisfied by the skills available. At the same time, there is a great need for employment opportunities in Costa Rica, where women make up the majority of the population.

- The ICT industry requires diverse visions, abilities and sensitivities for innovation and for the generation of quality products. The integration of women will strengthen creativity and originality in the technological products developed.

- Technological products that can solve social, economic, political and cultural issues in Costa Rica need to be developed. The design of these solutions involves the contributions of very diverse groups living in Costa Rica, among them women.

Action steps

The incorporation of women in the ICT sector should start from a comprehensive approach. This should begin with an analysis to try to understand the reasons behind their exclusion in such an important economic sector. Cooperativa Sulá Batsú, a member of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) network, has been working on this subject for years. Currently Sulá Batsú is developing a process supported by UN Women called TIC-as. The integration of women in the ICT sector should include:

- Working with girls (especially ten years and older), their parents and teachers to combat the stereotypes in relation to gender and technology. In addition, girls should be encouraged to appropriate technology.

- Creating conditions in universities so that fewer women doing ICT majors drop out before they

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1   www.centralamericadata.com/en/article/business_commerce/
     Costa_Rica_Among_Leaders_in_Outsourcing

2   According to the 2007 Household Survey.

complete their studies. We need to create an environment that assists as many women as possible in completing their studies (including enrolment conditions that support pregnant students, and creating more general support networks).

- Creating the appropriate conditions in the ICT sector that can take advantage of the possibilities of technology to support the incorporation of women in the production processes and management of ICT companies (flexible schedules, women's networks, online training, among others).

- Creating policies that increase the number of women entrepreneurs working in the sector, not only through technical but also financial support. In addition, it is quite important that support networks are created and resources made available for women entrepreneurs.

- It is important to mention that the issue of incorporating women in the ICT sector in Costa Rica is generating a lot of interest, especially at universities and colleges, which have begun to think about how to attract women and encourage them to stay in classes. Similarly, some companies are developing mentor programmes for female students and creating women engineer networks to help simplify the integration of women in the ICT sector.

- There is a lot of work left to do in this field in Costa Rica, especially in governmental institutions working on gender, digital policies and entrepreneurship. ■