



Breaking the walls of social exclusion of women rural by means of ICTs: The case of 'digital divides' in Galician



Isabel Novo-Corti, Laura Varela-Candamio*, María Teresa García-Álvarez

Faculty of Economics and Business, Campus de Elviña, s/n, 15005 A Coruña, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the digital divides for women in rural areas within the Information Society, referring particularly to the Galician experience (Autonomous Region in the North West of Spain). In order to explore the barriers to social and labor exclusion it was elaborated a survey relating with the use and impact of ITC in social and labor experiences of rural women. The results showed that rural women are aware of the key role played for ITC on their way to achieve the participation on decision making process as well as in social life and labor. The main barriers to the Internet penetration in women social life were employment, education and income. From an individual point of view, the existence of non-users was explained by a combination of access problems, lack of ICT skills or rather negative attitudes towards ITC. Finally, a bunch of policy recommendations is proposed focus on providing better Internet access in rural areas and to sensitize the population, particularly the oldest, about the importance of gender equality in access to technology in order to avoid digital barriers for rural women and reduce social exclusion of this group.

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1. Introduction

ITC are key promoting community connectivity in contemporary society (; Bin-Abbas & Haj Bakry, 2012). However, and against the generalized and speed on penetration of Internet,¹ non-user community groups persist in economically and geographically marginalised areas (Rogers, 2003). These minority communities are at risk of digital exclusion and therefore, due to the existing digital age, of social exclusion (Tsatsou et al., 2011). The existence of non-users can be explained by a combination of access problems, lack of ICT skills or rather negative attitudes towards ITC (Verdegem & Verhoest, 2009). As result, an inequality in the power to communicate and to process information digitally is generated. This phenomenon, the so-called 'digital divides' (Hilbert, 2011; NTIA, 1999; OECD, 2001) is hampering the connectivity online.

According to Polat (2012) the main minority communities less likely to be Internet users appears when communities are old, disabled, female, reside in rural areas and existing policies do not reach out to these groups. In particular, gender inequalities are behind the main disadvantage for women to use Internet in the day life (Prado Martínez, 2007). Our society does not have yet to be embarked on the path of reconciliation between a woman's work and her family duties; nor have begun to mesh out a sense of shared responsibility across genders. For example, the unpaid

work women do at home, called reproductive tax (Palmer, 1992), represents 37% of Galician gross domestic product (Galician Statistics Institute, 2006). Since Internet has become an important tool for women' social and labor inclusion some measures must be implemented to avoid this gender digital divides. Indeed, in some countries, such as Iran, Internet became in an important tool to participate in communication discourse and social action and, because of that, female Internet users have increased in the last years (Shirazi, 2012). Using data from 12 Latin American and 13 African countries from 2005 to 2008, Hilbert (2011) shows that the minor women access and use of ITC is a direct result of their unfavorable conditions with respect to employment, education and income. The APC women's program² analyzed Internet access problems of 700 women's groups worldwide and concluded that lack of technology training and inadequate knowledge are the main problems in Europe and the United States. These aspects also ranked second in importance in other countries where the main problems are lack of infrastructure and a shortage of economic resources.

On the other hand, digital disparities are interwoven with other social inequalities, reinforcing the effects on social and economic inequalities. In Europe, Internet-based political and social communication (Ricci, 1998; Servaes & Heinderyckx, 2002) has been influenced by a strong technology dimension, with an emphasis on the installation of necessary infrastructure and equipment, especially in rural areas (Grimes, 2000; Preston, Cawley, &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 981167000.

E-mail addresses: isabel.novo.corti@udc.es (I. Novo-Corti), laura.varela.candamio@udc.es (L. Varela-Candamio), mtgarcia@udc.es (M.T. García-Álvarez).

¹ For ICT penetration rates during the past 15 years, see ITU, 2010.

² Association for Progressive Founded in 1990. (APC's Women's Networking Supporting Programme) It is composite for 700 groups of women and it began working in 1993.

Metykova, 2007). However, in the last years, the interest about the social dimension has increased strongly. In the EU, the main policies developed to improve rural areas focused on diminishing effects of distance from core markets and enhancing the learning capacities by improving access to relevant information (Bocconi, Dini, & Ott, 2012; Grimes, 2000). Since the evolution of businesses makes knowledge of ITC a central pillar of social relations (UN, 2008), it is imperative that difficulty in accessing new technologies not be added to the burdens faced by women (especially in rural areas) to avoid a digital divide along gender lines. Moreover, the development of social policies (specifically, policies of inequality) have served to design and put in place several actions to minimize the risk of social exclusion for women. This is true even in certain areas of the developed countries of the European Union, especially Objective I areas, such as our case study, Galician, in the northwest of Spain. These policies are particularly necessary since many social development indicators place this region under the Spanish and European average. In February 2010, the Galician regional government launched a Broadband Plan which aimed to bring Internet connection to even the most inaccessible areas. Almost a year later, approximately one third of the total population which previously had no access to the network can now go online without any technical difficulties.³ Despite these advances, Internet access in Galician society is still smaller than the average in Spain. Based on data from November 2010 included in the General Media Study relating to this regional area, 44.3% of Galician people were identified as Internet users against the 25% users in 2005. By gender, men spend the most hours online (a total of 55.2) followed closely by women (44.8). However, these results are still insufficient. However, despite all these efforts and policy measures, Galicia has a disadvantage position in development indices of Information Policy.

This paper focuses the analysis on a selected minority community of this digital inequality, the women in the rural area of Galician (Spain), and gives some social and economic policy recommendations to increase ITC penetration and reduce social exclusion of this group. The results showed that rural women are aware of the key role played for ITC on their way to achieve the participation on decision making process as well as in social life and labor. The main barriers to the Internet penetration in women social life were employment, education and income. From an individual point of view, the existence of non-users was explained by a combination of access problems, lack of ICT skills or rather negative attitudes towards ITC.

After this introduction, this paper has been structured as follows. In Section 2, it is discussed the main factors explaining the current situation of women in rural areas, focusing especially in the Galician case. In Section 3, an approach the social reality of rural women in Galicia through two complementary types of analysis is undertaken: a qualitative approach through personal interviews and a quantitative one by developing a questionnaire and a survey. In Section 4, they are summarized the results obtained by this fieldwork. In Section 5, a bunch of policy recommendations arising from the rural women in Galicia are shown. Finally, Section 6 summarize the main conclusions of the paper.

2. Digital divides: the case of rural women in Galicia

In this section the main factors explaining the current situation of rural women in Galicia are discussed, exploring gender-based discrimination and the socio-geographic areas in which they live, is a goal of this work. The 1995 UN Human Development Report issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

concluded that no country treats its women as well as its men. The report also stated that women are poorer than men and that 7 out of every 10 poor persons were women.

2.1. Gender inequality

The first factor for poverty in women is related to gender identity and the second to the sexual division of labor (Volio, 2011). The first category is decisive in women's identities, imposed gender roles, discourse, ideological content, stereotypes, prejudices, forms of power, limited opportunities, segregation, oppression, human rights violations, the denial and the invisibility that affect the position of women in society and women's impoverishment. Naila Kabeer coined the term "gender coercion" to refer to all of these aspects (Kabeer, 1998) which still persist today. The second category, the sexual division of labor, relegates women to domestic work, to certain feminine sectors or to the lowest positions in the organizational pyramid, part-time jobs with little job security, etc. This category has also been tagged as 'glass ceiling' which reflects that it is a widespread phenomenon in the world. In many cases, both situations occur simultaneously, leading women to a situation of structural overstress, with endless workdays. The sexual division of labor and the required by house work limits opportunities for women, constraining on their outlook for professional development and social level. All of these factors impact women's potential and actual income and consequently the possibility of independence and freedom of choice. Moreover, there is the general tendency to pay lower wages to women, even when they perform similar work to that of their male counterparts. This factor only exacerbates poverty in women. It is a type of discrimination not justified by the educational levels of women or the number of hours worked (García Bartolomé, 1999). It is a wage discrimination based wholly on gender. The economic deprivation of women is enhanced by the unpaid nature of housework, which is necessary for the reproduction of family life and the economy, but not paid. The aforementioned factors help us to build an operational diagram of the mechanism just discussed in Fig. 1.

2.2. Rural areas and population dispersal

There are different criteria for establishing more or less strict classifications for distinguishing rural from urban areas, yet as a general trend Galician country folk are increasingly tied to the city. The boundaries between the two are becoming blurred, generating a growing semirural sector. The population tends to concentrate in the rural areas closest to cities, abandoning more remote villages. Yet despite this limitation, the OECD established a viable criterion by defining rural municipalities as those in which population

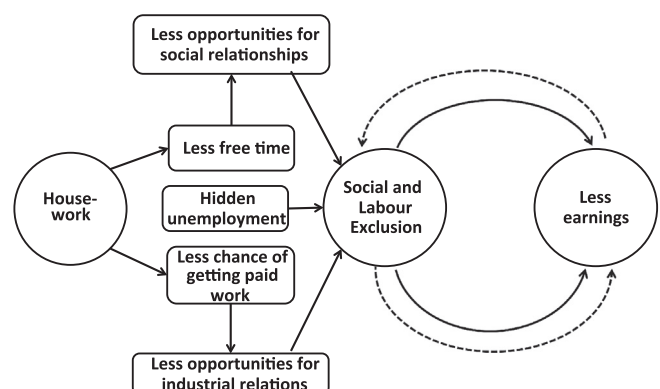


Fig. 1. Diagram of the process of social and labor exclusion of women due to time spent on domestic work. Source: Own elaboration.

³ Most of these citizens live in inland and in small rural villages, as it will be shown in Section 2.3.

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