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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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01.02.2020

Mexicans Building a Feminist Internet Face Challenges

When Patricia Azcagorta ran as a candidate for mayor of Caborca, Sonora, in Mexico in 2018, a video was circulated on social media of a woman dancing in her underwear, together with photos of Azcagorta, and messages accusing her of being a stripper.

Using intimate images – real or fake – over the Internet to attack a woman's credibility, shame her, or silence her, is one of various types of online violence against women that the national Mexican government will likely formalize as a crime in coming months.

Called the Olimpia law, though it is actually a modification to an existing law on women's right to a life free of violence, the amendment is one of few legal initiatives in Mexico with grassroots origins. It was passed unanimously by the national congress in November last year following a strong campaign by Olimpia Coral Melo and other feminist groups. It now needs to be passed by the senate.

Coral Melo was 18 when a video of her naked was passed around on Whatsapp. As a result, she was insulted by local press, which also used her image on their covers to sell, she became known as the gordibuena of Puebla – a sexist reference to her body shape, and she received numerous requests from men for sex. She said she shut herself inside for eight months, and attempted suicide three times.

When Coral Melo eventually tried to denounce what happened to her at the public prosecutor's office, she was told it wasn't a crime. So she organized with other women to create a proposal for an amendment or law.

But the amendment that is now being passed has limitations, and many activists, based on their experience of the Mexican legal system, are dubious that it will be implemented fairly. Mexico has the highest rate of impunity in the Americas.

In the Internet world, where men dominate the media (as experts and journalists) and the comments sections, the question becomes if this amendment is a positive first step in creating a violence-free Internet based on principles of respect and equality for Mexicans, or if it is more of a hindrance?

Types of digital violence committed in Mexico and their impact

According to Mexico's Association for Progress in Communications, more than 9 million women here have faced some type of technology-based aggression.

Luchadoras, a Mexican feminist collective that spent two years accompanying women who experienced online violence, identified 13 types of aggression. These include stalking and constant monitoring, threats, discriminatory expression, dissemination of personal or intimate information, profiting from sexual exploitation through images, unsolicited behavior (harassment), and extortion.

A common example of profiting from images are accounts like this one selling or trading "packs" of intimate or sexually explicit photos or videos. This tweet says "...Hundreds of fans are getting their packs. If you have packs of your friends, ex-girlfriends, or you take packs, or you have your own... contact us and we'll swap you for a pack we have on our page or for membership." Note, that when referring to "friends" and "girlfriends" the words are feminine, and that consent isn't required in this public account when sending in photos of other people.

Luchadoras also conducted a study on digital violence against women during the 2018 elections (when 18,299 positions from national to local level were up for grabs) and they found that the most common online aggressions against women during the electoral period were discriminatory expressions, threats, and campaigns to discredit and that there were five key patterns underlying the attacks – those based around judging the sexual character of the candidate, sexual objectification, attacks on the family, gender roles, and appearance.

Lucia Rojas, for example, was a young feminist who ran as an independent candidate and is now a federal deputy. She said during the campaign her image, and tattoos and piercings were attacked, and she was attacked for being a woman, lesbian, and young. "My credibility, knowledge, and experience were questioned," she said.

The impact of online violence for women individually and collectively is often seen as less significant because it takes place in a virtual space. But, “what is virtual is also real, and that means the effects of this type of violence are real, are felt in the body, in the spirit, and in the rights of woman,” said Lourdes Barrera, of Luchadoras.

Dr. Emma Short, a psychologist and reader in cyber psychology at the University of Bedfordshire actually thinks the impact of online abuse is greater, “because your victimization is broadcast for everyone to see. It’s often joined by a third party so the crowd or pack is going after you. So very quickly, it feels as though the whole world is after you.”

Luchadoras talked to women who had experienced online violence and they identified impacts they’d had, including nausea, headaches, lack of appetite, stress, anxiety, rage, depression, paranoia, fear, confusion, and impotence. They also talked about self-censorship and abandoning technology.

Public violence such as online violence is a tactic to exert power over women. It impinges on our ability to freely express ourselves, while the hate speech and abuse of trolls is tolerated.

Mexico making changes

The addition to article 6 of the General Law on Women’s Access to a Life Free of Violence defines digital violence as “any act through information and communication technology, Internet platforms, social networks, or email ... that threatens the integrity, dignity, intimacy, freedom, or private life of women, or causes damage or psychological, physical, economic, or sexual suffering.” This addition, known as the Olimpia law, lists such violence as including things like harassment, threats, insults, data violation, hate messages, and more.

The ruling outlines the need for education campaigns, prevention programs, and training. Crimes can be denounced to the public prosecutor’s office, who can then order the companies behind the platforms to block or delete the images or videos involved. Punishments vary by state, but include up to six years in prison, or fines of up to 84,000 pesos (US\$4,600).

I talked to Isabel Portillo, a psychologist who has focused on violence and on training regarding cyber bullying, of the In Movement Foundation, about the amendment. She argued that the Olimpia law was necessary, and “Olimpia’s efforts ... have started to

have an impact, however, more measures are necessary in order to eliminate the violence that there is on social media.”

She said it was important to raise awareness of the amendment so that victims can denounce cyberbullying, and those carrying it out are aware that there are consequences.

However, I also talked to Martha Tudón, digital rights coordinator at Artículo 19 Mexico, an organization focused on defending freedom of expression and the right to information. She argued that the amendment was problematic. “The definitions are very broad ... for example, what is “intimacy”? It could be my neck, my hair. What we have seen with these types of vague laws is that everything can come under them and they are used to attack journalists. The people who most take advantage of these laws are authorities who see some news on the Internet and want it taken down,” she said.

“Such laws end up being used for populism, so politicians can wash their hands of the problem and not improve things at the roots. The amendment is very cosmetic. Further, the arbitrator is the state. Do you really want to give a patriarchal state the capacity to say what content should be online?”

Luchadoras, on the other hand, say the Olimpia Law runs the risk of staying on paper only. They call for adequate denunciation processes that are sensitive to the needs of women and that protect them rather than “re-victimizing” them. They say that beyond fines or prison, actions that help women repair, as well as guarantees that the crimes won’t be repeated, are important.

Inequality is embedded into the Internet’s architecture

The Internet is playing a role in “structuring our identities and organizing our social interactions” said Dr. Charlotte Webb, co-founder of Feminist Internet. And that Internet is based on the same economic and power structures as the real world.

Men dominate the tech sector, and more so the ownership of that sector, and their gender biases are reproduced in tech like Alexa and Siri – personal assistants with female voices. The content of the Internet, from porn to the mainstream media, is also largely run by men. At Wiki, for example, 84%-91% of the editors are male. That lack of diversity then translates to the fact that only 17.7% of the biographies on the English language Wiki are about women.

In Mexico, “often men are the ones (in their family) who own the devices. It’s a power mechanism. They lend theirs to their partner for a while. So they control how we access

it, and that means our access to education, culture, health information – important things,” said Tudón.

What’s more, the Internet is “colonized by men from the US,” Tudón argues. “And when there are women, they are white and privileged. I think the Internet will be more inclusive when communities have their own tools of information and dissemination. In Mexico, we mostly use Facebook, Twitter, Google, Whatsapp – meaning we’re using tools made in the US that respond to a different context.”

She said she hopes for a time when communities can create their own content in their own languages, on their own terms.

Portillo also encourages women in Mexico to provide mutual support to other women on the Internet who are being attacked. “We have a lot of potential to show solidarity,” she concluded.

CounterPunch 01.02.2020