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Digital Inclusion of Senior Citizens Pending on the National Agenda

Introduction

Senior citizens' scant use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a constant worldwide, regionally, and nationally. Three causes of this stand out: the generational digital divide, ageism, and a rejection of technology. These reasons, together with more and more digital apps for carrying out mundane tasks (payment of services, purchases, banking, health care, government procedures) that can no longer be done any other way, marginalize this segment of the population or completely exclude it. Worldwide data show that 48.3 percent of these men and women fall into this category; in Mexico, specifically, almost 59 percent of adults over sixty do not use the Internet. The older they are, the less able or interested they are in using it.

The Federal Telecommunications Institute (IFT) periodically publishes figures about the probability of Inter-

net usage based on different variables. Among them is age, since nationally, only 28.2 percent of persons over sixty are liable to use the Internet. This means that it is worthwhile to analyze their apparently scant interest in using digital resources, ICT legislation, and the strategies and programs available to encourage senior citizens to enter the digital sphere.

Causes of Senior Citizens' Digital Exclusion

The digital gap is one of the main reasons different social groups are excluded. In the 1990s, it was thought that inequality in ICT access was basically due to the lack of economic resources for acquiring the necessary programs and devices or for having connectivity. This led to a marked division between developed countries with access and developing countries without it, as well as between people with economic means and those without them. Personal issues have been added to this list, outstanding

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among them, the lack of skills for appropriately using digital resources. All this comes together among older adults, who are affected both by the generational digital gap and the lack of digital education.

Another cause is ageism or discrimination based on age, social behavior, and a self-perception that marginalizes and discriminates against this age group regarding certain activities in different spaces. According to the 2022 National Survey on Discrimination in Mexico (Enadis), only 31.6 percent of senior citizens thought their rights were very well respected; the rest (67.8 percent) said that they are somewhat or not very respected or not respected at all. Among those who said they had been discriminated against, 61.6 percent said the reason was their age.¹

This survey asked participants to accept or reject certain statements: one was related to technologies. For example, 87.8 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, “Older people have difficulty using technology,” and 77.4 percent agreed that “Most people are easily exasperated by old people.” Both these statements lead us to the third reason senior citizens do not use ICTs very much: a rejection of technology, understood as the behavior of certain individuals or communities who decide not to use ICTs despite having the money and capacity to install technology.

This behavior can be due to five main causes:

1. The lack of a need that can only be satisfied by using these technologies;
2. The ICT design and devices do not take into consideration their physical, psychological, and emotional characteristics;
3. ICTs make them feel insecure, since they think sharing personal data and situations can make them vulnerable;
4. The feeling of a loss of control in interactions, because the dividing line between the private and the public is reduced or diminished; and
5. The phenomenon called technophobia, or the fear of modern technologies.

Seniors’ Right to Use ICTs in Mexico

Access to information is a human right established by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, passed in 1948. Its Article 19 states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”² Since this declaration was adopted and its principles included in each country’s legislation, it has become a fundamental right of everyone.

On a regional level, in 2015, the Organization of American States passed the “Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons (A-70),”³ which Mexico signed only on January 11, 2023, and which came into effect on April 20 of the same year.⁴ The stated aim was to “promote, protect, and ensure the recognition and full enjoyment and exercise of all fundamental human rights and freedoms of older individuals in equal conditions, in order to contribute to their full inclusion, integration, and participation in society.”⁵

The document protects civil rights, equality, and the right to non-discrimination based on age, as well as the right to life and dignity in old age, to independence and autonomy, and to express oneself, offer an opinion, and access to information. It points to different unconventional resources such as personal and emergency information files; legal frameworks, different media and information technology systems and forms of communication such as the Internet, social media, and electronic information services. It also states that the information must be understandable and adapted to older persons’ cultural identity, educational level, and communications requirements.

Mexico has published laws covering the rights of senior citizens to information and access to ICTs as a way of promoting their social and digital inclusion. The following describes some of them:

1. General Law on Health. Article 51b 1 of this law, published in 1984, recognizes the right of any health service, system, and institution user to “receive sufficient, clear, timely, truthful information, as well as the necessary orientation about his/her health and the risks and alternatives of procedures, therapeutic and surgical diagnoses offered or applied

to him/her.”⁶ Information is considered one of the basic elements of public health since it makes it possible to know and disseminate the details of health conditions, resources, and services in the country, both among the institutions involved and among the public in general.

2. Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination. This law was passed in 2003 to deal with exclusion.⁷ The amendments passed in 2014 specifically mention senior citizens. One of the aspects of discrimination the law points to is the lack of access to information and to ICTs; precisely to level out and resolve inequalities, the amendments states that this access must be guaranteed.

The normative framework of programs to promote social well-being is established in the General Law on Social Development.⁸ While the law does not specifically allude to seniors, it can be inferred that they are included since this law covers those who are in vulnerable situations. A debate exists about whether all senior citizens are vulnerable, given that some have the economic means that allow them to have a good quality of life, and they have aged in an active, healthy way. However, their physical and psychological characteristics classify them as persons in vulnerable circumstances. Article 10 stipulates the target groups who have the right to access the information they need to identify the programs that support them, their operating rules, the resources they have, and their coverage.

1. Law on the Rights of Senior Citizens. Each of Mexico’s thirty-two states (including Mexico City) has its own law. The first to publish legislation of this kind was the state of Yucatán, in 1999; it was called the Law for Society’s Protection of the Aging Population. The most recent is Sinaloa state’s 2017 Law on the Rights of Senior Citizens. The federal legislation in this area dates from 2002 and was most recently amended on January 24, 2020. All these laws have the same objective: “guaranteeing the rights of senior citizens and establishing the bases and means for their exercise.”⁹

The federal legislation makes two references to information. One is a tacit mention of the need to “promote the dissemination of the rights and values that benefit

senior citizens in order to create awareness in families and society in general with regard to the issues this sector of the population faces.”¹⁰ The other is an explicit mention of ensuring they have information about the programs that benefit them.

It should be noted that all the laws dealing with senior citizens consider the family as the institution responsible for their implementation and follow-up. People believe that Mexico has a pro-elder culture due to the legacy (and existence) of first peoples. However, there is also a high degree of intra-familial violence and discrimination, which is projected into the community and society as a whole, above all in the cities.

Programs and Strategies to Promote Seniors’ Digital Inclusion in Mexico

The government document “Estrategia Digital Nacional 2021-2024” (National Digital Strategy 2021-2024) points to the widening social equality gap as a national problem due to both public and private institutions’ provision of digital goods, services, and information exchange. However, these institutions put forward the solution of installing the infrastructure needed for the entire population to have Internet access wherever they are, whether in public spaces, health facilities, schools, or highways, with a priority on intensive use.

The scope of the strategy mentions digital inclusion of vulnerable communities, such as older adults. However, it makes no proposal for a program or plan to make it operational.

On the other hand, some government, private, and educational institutions do have programs and strategies to support the development of digital skills and mitigate exclusion. Their aim is to instruct seniors in the use of

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icts and digital apps. These institutions include the National Senior Citizens Institute (INAPAM), Telmex, the UNAM, and CECAM, among others.

1. The National Senior Citizens Institute offers several alternatives for acquiring digital skills. Among their periodic activities are courses on computing and orientation about apps, cell phones, and tablets. The course's objective is for seniors to familiarize themselves with the use of devices like personal computers, tablets, and smartphones. Recently, the INAPAM launched its program "Interconnected Old Ages. Digital Inclusion of Senior Citizens" to foster their integration into society, promote their personal development, and reduce the generational digital divide. However, no way was found to implement the course.
2. Teléfonos de México (Telmex), a private telecommunications company that supports digital inclusion of the general population and seniors in particular, organizes fairs that bring together technological products that help in the areas of the economy, health, and leisure. They also carry out activities to introduce the use of mobile telephony, tablets, and computers. Both INAPAM and Telmex options are free of charge.
3. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) offers a program of Digital Inclusion for Seniors in a venue close to the older population, the Center for Virtual Learning (CAV) in Mexico City's Tlalpan municipality.
4. The Centers for Continuing Education for Older Adults (CECAM) offers basic, intermediate, and advanced computing courses, as well as technological practices in digital edition of video, digital platforms, digital photographic retouching, and mobile telephony. The courses are inexpensive and accessible so that people from all socio-economic levels can take them.

Other programs exist but their impact has not been assessed and they are not sufficiently publicized. This means that we can say that their results are not those hoped for in accordance with the investment made, and therefore, this continues to be a pending task on Mexico's agenda for designing strategies to avoid social and digital exclusion of seniors.

The solution requires promoting the convergence and activity of different governmental, educational, and mass

media bodies and agents with three basic objectives. First, they need to identify the existing programs and strategies that promote digital inclusion of seniors nationwide. Secondly, they must be publicized. And thirdly, different kinds of proposals must be developed and implemented: creating basic digital skills programs, as well as multiplatform digital apps whose design considers seniors' characteristics and social contexts, with a design of policies that deal appropriately with the topic.

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Notes

1 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación Enadis 2022. Presentación de resultados," INEGI, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/enadis/2022/doc/enadis2022_resultados.pdf, accessed in September 2023.

2 United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. [Editor's Note.]

3 OAS, "Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons (A-70)," June 15, 2015, https://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/inter_american_treaties_A-70_human_rights_older_persons_signatories.asp. [Editor's Note.]

4 The Senate unanimously passed the convention on December 13, 2022, and the measure was published on January 10, 2023, in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (DOF). Secretaría del Bienestar, "México ratifica Convención Interamericana sobre la Protección de los Derechos Humanos de las Personas Mayores," Segob, communiqué 059, March 29, 2023. [Editor's Note.]

5 Secretaría de Gobernación, "DECRETO Promulgatorio de la Convención Interamericana sobre la Protección de los Derechos Humanos de las Personas Mayores," *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, Segob, April 20, 2023, https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5686151&fecha=20/04/2023#gsc.tab=0, accessed in October 2023.

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8 H. Cámara de Diputados, "Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación," June 11, 2003 (most recent amendment, January 19, 2023), <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LFPED.pdf>, p. 1, accessed in August 2023.

9 H. Cámara de Diputados, "Ley de los Derechos de las Personas Adultas Mayores," June 25, 2002 (most recent amendment, May 10, 2022), <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LDPAM.pdf>, accessed in August 2023.

10 *Ibid.*, Art. 10, Secc. xviii, p. 8.