

Gender Perspectives on Telecenters

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The concept of community-based Telecenters has recently gained widespread attention as a strategically vital response to the perpetual lack of access to information and communications technologies and services in the developing world. While telecenters are not an entirely new idea, the strong emphasis on this new policy option offers an intriguing and encouraging approach to overcoming the wide disparities of access in the Global Information Society, and as such, to provide opportunities for developing societies and historically disadvantaged regions and populations to participate in the newly emerging social and economic orders.

This paper argues that in any given community, telecenter plans must take into account the disparate needs and demands of women and men. Hence, gender analysis must be an integral part of telecenter planning efforts, rather than an “add-on” task. The goal of telecenters is not simply to provide access to information and communication technologies (ICT), but also to inform, train, and provide economic opportunities to the communities they serve. This paper also focuses on rural and peri-urban areas, as these suffer from more extreme access problems. From a gender perspective, telecenters should provide services considering the specific context of women’s lives and environment. This way, telecenters can benefit women, their communities and contribute to their lives in numerous ways.

From Universal Service to Universal Access – the New Policy Direction

Universal service is traditionally defined as access to a telephone in every household. It is usually measured by the percentage of households with telephone service. In some cases, the number of telephone lines per 100 inhabitants (or teledensity) is used. While the percentage of households with telephone service is high in developed countries, it is quite low in most developing countries. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), by 1996, 95% of households in high income or developed countries have a telephone. In contrast, only about 18% of the households in the rest of the world had a telephone. In terms of teledensity, developed countries had

about 54 lines per 100 inhabitants, while developing countries had about 5 lines per 100 inhabitants by 1996.¹ When we look at the urban-rural disparity in developing countries, the figures are even more depressing. While about 60% of the population in developing countries live in rural areas, over 80% of the telephone lines are in urban areas. Unfortunately, the telecommunications industry has not yet started to compile gender desegregated statistics, however I hope that this will become a priority for telecommunications authorities. Women are a large percentage of rural populations and women headed households are increasing everywhere. Understanding the true impact of universal access can only be meaningful if all people are considered and if all existing gaps are addressed.

The magnitude of this problem – *the access gap* – has led to a recent rethinking of universal service and universal service policies for developing countries. Indeed, a telephone line per household may not be economically or technically feasible for many developing countries. Therefore, the wider concept of *universal access* to telecommunications should be the focus of the discussion. This new approach to universal service provides a shift from the concept of a “telephone per household” to wider “community access” to telecommunications. In fact, it not only broadens the definition but also changes the concept of access to telecommunications to mean access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). ICTs include, in addition to traditional telephony, faxing services, computer services, photocopying, electronic mail, internet access and access to an array of local, regional and national information previously available only to a few.

This new approach also provides the opportunity for policy makers and practitioners to directly address the gender gap and the rural-urban gap in access to telecommunications services, particularly with respect to the demands by rural women and by promoting ICT use where it will be beneficial for development. Therefore, and to ensure that universal access policy does not perpetuate gender disparities, it is of the utmost importance to consider telecommunications policy from a gender perspective. Universal access policy must consider the gender context and only then can we have equitable and truly universal access policies.

It is important to note here that the concept of universal access does not in any way diminish the importance of universal service as generally accepted. Instead, universal access to telecommunications provides an interim solution to universal service and a new policy approach to a problem too difficult to tackle in many countries. In fact, universal access guarantees that individuals in every community have access to ICTs, even when access to basic telephony is met. As a result, several developing countries have developed universal access policies and goals to improve telecommunications access to telephony. These policies differ among countries and are based on varying criteria, such as population, time or distance. By adopting these policies, policy makers and regulators can design and develop plans to achieve universal access within their specific country context. For instance, the size of the average locality, the percentage of women headed

¹ ITU, World Telecommunications Development Report, Universal Access, 1998.

households or the available means of transportation, differ in different countries. Therefore, policy makers and regulators must be aware of their specific country characteristics before they develop universal access policies.

Focusing on Rural and Peri-urban Areas – Telecenters as an Option for Universal Access

Despite the fact that the majority of the population lives in rural areas, these areas have always been discriminated against in terms of telecommunications investments around the world. As discussed above, when it comes to rural telecommunications access the picture is even bleaker in developing countries, where close to 90% of the available infrastructure and network access is provided to urban areas. While there is no available data, it is also known that peri-urban areas (low-income residential settlements around major urban areas in developing countries) suffer from similar lack of service and access as rural areas. While access to telecommunications is important regardless of location, it is clear that a special focus is needed to ensure that rural and peri-urban areas are not neglected and consequently left out on the margins of the “global information society.” Policy makers should seriously consider these areas in their countries and adopt policies that correctly address the current gaps and disparities.

Rural areas have traditionally been neglected for several reasons:

- Generally more expensive to serve (long distances to install infrastructure, smaller customer base, longer payback periods);
- Difficulty to upgrade infrastructure to provide advance services;
- Low levels of scale economies;
- Lack of interest from the part of the carriers to provide feasible technology to rural areas (e.g., radio, wireless);
- Low disposable income and consequently, low demand levels;
- Lack of understanding of the value of rural inputs (production, cultural, societal, etc).

In spite of the above reasons, universal service and universal access goals should reach 100% of the population, and a special focus should be given to under-served and isolated rural populations. In fact, there is no reason for such disparities to exist and to continue to be allowed. Instead, policy makers and regulators must ensure that rural areas benefit from basic telephony as well as from ICTs in general. Technological developments, such as radio transmission or fixed wireless, have become widely available and provide affordable solutions to rural telecommunications. Most importantly, community telecenters provide a feasible alternative for rural telecommunications access. Indeed, telecommunications authorities should focus on developing policies that encourage rural development and affordable access to ICTs in rural and peri-urban areas. A policy centered on telecenters may be the appropriate response in many developing countries.

Telecenters have recently become a development option to address the lack of access to telecommunications services in many countries of the world, particularly developing

countries. They offer an alternative for access in areas traditionally lacking telecommunications infrastructure, such as rural areas and peri-urban areas, and provide an array of ICT services, training and resources needed for communities' development.

Despite their potential, telecenters will most likely function and be successful within a specific policy environment, one which develops and promotes the necessary support systems and the appropriate policies to allow for sustainable centers (e.g., ensure gender equity in the implementation process, promote pricing policy that favors discounts for community telecenters' services, financial incentives that promote investment where it is most needed). If policy makers want to contribute to universal access in their countries, they should focus their attention on the demands of their rural and peri-urban population, and telecenters provide an option worth investing in.

Gender Perspectives on Telecentre Implementation

Unfortunately, and as in other areas, women and girls tend to benefit marginally from developments in telecommunications and access to services, particularly in the initial planning and implementation stages. Even in telecentre projects, which tend to be community focused and supposedly more aware of community needs, gender has not become an integral part of the planning equation. A few telecenters around the world have committed themselves to target women and women's needs, however, they have encountered tremendous difficulties. Most of these problems result from lack of gender analysis and training to correctly address the specific needs and demands of women and girls. It is crucial to invest in gender analysis and training to ensure that telecenters can appropriately respond and address women's needs and demands, and consequently guarantee that women use and benefit from telecentre services, and consequently, more efficiently contribute to the economic development of their communities.

With universal service policies, which reflect a "gender-neutral" approach to policy, women's economic and social conditions are neglected. For example, it is a documented fact that, women's wages are on average lower than men's wages and women spend most of their incomes with their children and families in most countries in the world. Consequently, women have a much lower level of or no disposable income. Yet, despite these well-documented disparities, universal service policies never address these issues and simply assume that all households, regardless of their structure, can "on average" afford basic telephone service. This is obviously not the case.

In addition to monthly telephone charges, already at rates higher than what most households can afford, most developing countries still have high installation charges, which create a major barrier to demand. This situation, where there is demand for services but lack of purchasing power, provides the ideal setting for community-based service centers, such as telecenters. Telecenters provide an alternative source for telecommunications services at the community level and tend to provide them at reasonable rates.

The goal of telecenters is to provide access to information and communication technologies (ICT), to inform, train, and provide economic opportunities to the communities they serve. In addition, telecenters may also provide other services needed by the community, such as tele-education, tele-medicine, government information, etc. There are various models of telecenters (e.g., teleshop, basic telecentre, multipurpose community telecentre, multipurpose community centre, etc), mostly distinguished by the type and quantity of infrastructure employed.² Each specific model is chosen and implemented according to resources as well as community needs and demand for services.

Telecenters should provide services considering the specific context of their customers' lives and environment. From a gender perspective, telecentre projects must make an active effort to consider the disparate needs of women and men in the communities they serve. For example, more women may need training in computer use while most men need training in customer service. In addition, because of disparate literacy levels and language, it may be necessary to develop different training curriculum for different user groups. As Janice Brodman concluded in a recently written paper³, there are a set of requirements or inputs that should be considered to ensure that women have access to ICTs and that the telecentre meets their needs. Specifically, these are:

- Conduct active outreach
- Ensure financial accessibility
- Ensure physical accessibility
- Provide training
- Ensure relevance
- Build confidence
- Enable participation

Telecenters that take into account these factors are more likely to attract women users, increase demand for their services and, consequently, become sustainable enterprises. This is particularly important in rural and peri-urban areas, where telecenters sustainability is a major concern and where women are more isolated and therefore less exposed to ICTs and their benefits.

Those telecenters around the world that have successfully addressed women's needs, have considered some of the above strategies in their planing and implementation efforts.⁴ In addition to these strategies to promote use, telecenters can further benefit rural women and girls and contribute to their lives in numerous ways, such as by:

² See Goussal, Dario, "Access to Information and Community Telecenters in South America," in *Telecenters Around the World*, ITU, Summer 2000, *forthcoming*, for an alternative discussion of telecentre models.

³ Brodman, Janice and Ambika Kapur, "Women and Telecenters," in *Telecenters Around the World*, ITU, Summer 2000, *forthcoming*.

⁴ Ibid.

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- providing access to an array of ICT and related services, such as basic telephony, access to computers and computer training courses, access to the internet and e-commerce opportunities, access to government information, employment information and opportunities, tele-education programs, health care information and, in some cases, actual treatment via tele-medicine programs;
- providing a business opportunity, in that many women or women's community organizations, can become owners or managers of different types of community telecenters;
- creating jobs for women in telecenters, where women can participate in community development activities and better incorporate women's specific programs within telecenter plans;
- providing community-specific or community-focused programs, such as literacy projects, ICT training, farming information, trading information, government data, health information and projects, among others;
- providing women-specific or gender-aware programs, such as literacy projects, ICT training, e-commerce initiatives, women's health information projects, among others;
- providing an incentive for businesses to locate in rural areas in the proximity of telecenters and to employ telecentre-trained workers;
- providing the skills necessary for members of rural communities to begin to develop their own business applications, such as developing community-based internet service providers (ISPs), as has been the case in the United States.

Considering the possibilities, it is clear that telecentre projects must integrate gender in all stages of telecentre project development and implementation. In fact, telecenters will only become a successful experiment if they address the needs and demands of all members of the communities they serve. Experiences from telecenters around the world show that, among other things:

- Women use the telephone more than computers;
- In general, women feel more intimidated by computers (particularly older women);
- Lack of information in local language is a disincentive for use of ICT services;
- Women are more comfortable with women-trainers and, in some cases, more comfortable in women-only training environments; and
- Most women would like to use resources provided by telecentre.

Clearly, women are interested in using ICTs, however, it is essential that telecenters address women's concerns and provide an adequate environment for women's participation and use. Telecentre projects must indeed focus on women's needs and

Broadman's suggestions are a good starting point for any telecentre project that seriously considers women and girls.

Telecenters in Latin America – A Gender Perspective

Rural populations in Latin America deserve the opportunities provided by telecentre projects and some telecenter projects in the region have proven that they can provide many of these benefits (see table below). However, from a gender perspective, much still needs to be done. Most telecentre projects in Latin America lack a gender focus and, therefore, women still make up a small number of users and beneficiaries. While some women may benefit from these telecenters' services, most telecenters do not create gender-aware programs or an environment specifically conducive to women's participation. This is particularly important in rural areas, where women have close to no access to information, as well as low access to education and training opportunities.

The following table summarises a number of telecentre initiatives in Latin America and briefly discusses if the telecentre has or not a particular gender focus. It is clear that gender has not been a priority, however, it is important to note that much of the information on telecenters in Latin America does not focus on gender and therefore may neglect important gender initiatives. For a discussion of telecentre experiences in Latin America, see Dario M. Goussal's forthcoming article in "Telecenters around the World" (ITU publications, Summer 2000). This article does not focus on gender issues but it provides important detail from telecentre experiences and lessons.

From a gender perspective, it is crucial that research be conducted to learn about positive and negative experiences. Most importantly, it is necessary to analyse gender programs and develop gender guidelines on how to properly integrate gender in the planning process and consequently during implementation.

Telecenters Experiences in Latin America A gender perspective	
Peru	<p>The Red Cientifica Peruana is one of two internet access providers in Peru. It is a not-for-profit organisation working at the national, regional, and international levels. It is self-financing, a generator of national content, and also a national integrator. Its website (http://ekeko.rcp.net.pe) is one of the most-visited web-sites in Latin America. The development of about 550 "Cabinas Publicas" (public booths) extends Internet access to the population over the coming years. There are few cabinas in rural areas but RCP expects to deploy telecenters in those areas with the assistance of the new Telecommunications Investment Fund, established by OSIPTEL (Global Knowledge 97, Session 3.6, Community Information Service Centers – Providing Affordable Access to the Poor and Rural Communities and discussions with Yuri Herrera, RCP, February, 2000)</p> <p>Gender Focus: there is no gender specific effort or program and men are still the majority of the users of the Cabinas in Peru. RCP provided access and web pages to a few NGO's that focus on women's issues.</p>
Mexico	<p>While some Telecenters have not been successful, primarily because of political interests and influence, others are successfully running. According to Robinson, "the Mexican telecenter initiative is only partially about computers and Internet connectivity. Its principal focus is on information policy – the availability and use of public domain information to strengthen participation in public policy debates, improve municipal administration and resource management, and create new opportunities for learning ... (it) is developing in tandem with a broader movement toward democratic reform." (Robinson, 1999)</p> <p>Gender Focus: no information available.</p>
Brazil	<p>"Brazil was one of the pioneers in Latin America in developing community telecentre experiments." Many of these experiments were successful and others have failed or struggled to survive.</p> <p>Gender Focus: no information available on the various telecentre projects implemented.</p>

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Chile	<p>“El Encuentro” is the first community telecentre in Chile. It is located in an urban community of Santiago, with 220,000 habitants – Peñalolen. Of these, 91% don’t have any university studies, and 25% of the families are headed by women head of households. Peñalolen is a young community, with an average age of 28.</p> <p>The centre provides access to ICTs for the population, with 6 computers available. Internet access prices are of \$1 per hour for students and \$1.3 for the rest of the public. The centre trains all workers as required.</p> <p>Gender Focus: The centre does not have a specific gender focus. However, the centre has a new project to train unemployed women between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. This project’s objective is to train women on ICT and technology issues to be ICT tutors, centre workers, and to train at, to become centre workers, and support women to implement a radio program (as the centre has it’s own community radio) to promote women’s rights and women’s history. This project is still waiting for funding and supporting agencies.</p> <p>(Discussions via email, February 2000, with Javier Perez Carranza, Manager, Telecentre “El Encuentro.”)</p>
Dominican Republic	<p>“The small community of El Limón, a few kilometres away from San José de Ocoa, it’s becoming an example for all rural communities in the country. This small community, dedicated to agricultural production and located between mountains, had not been provided electricity by the main electrical suppliers in the country. Since March, however, a new and innovative hidro-electric system offers electricity to the 73 households in El Limon. In addition, the population has access to the internet by using the computers installed at the community’s school. This innovative project was developed by the community with the technical and financial support of the UNDP and PRONATURA through the “Programa de Pequeños Subsidios del Fondo para el Medio Ambiente Mundial,” of Cornell University (United States), the International Rotary Club, and the Development Association of San José de Ocoa.”</p> <p>(http://www.sas.cornell.edu/cresp/ecopartners/)</p> <p>Gender Focus: none known.</p>

Other projects in Latin America include:

- The Multipurpose Community Telecenters initiated by the ITU in Surinam (four in the Brownsberg and Botopasi regions) and Honduras (delayed by Hurricane Mitch); no information available on gender issues and programs.
- Basic and civic telecenter projects developed by the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) together with local organisations in Ecuador (three Telecenters in indigenous communities of the Amazon) and Colombia (three in marginalized, urban areas surrounding Bogota); no data available on gender issues or programs.
- Servicio de Cabinas de Acceso a Internet (SCAI) and the Fundación Centro de Información Digital (Venezuela); no data available on gender issues or programs.
- The Centro de Mujeres Comunicadoras Indígenas (Guatemala) also offer public access to the Internet; gender focus as the overall goal of the organisation..

(Gomez, R. and P. Hunt, IDRC, 1999; also published in CHASQUI, June 1999.)

Sources: Miscellaneous documents, ITU reports and DNTA reports.

Engendered Telecommunications Policy and Regulation – The Impact on Telecenters Planning and Implementation Processes

There are various ways in which policy makers and regulators can design universal service and universal access policies. These may be developed in connection with market restructuring efforts (such as carrier's network expansion obligations) and/or by establishment of telecommunications laws addressing these goals (by mandating development goals for the national network). Most importantly, policy decisions must reflect a gendered approach to address universal access and universal service concerns. In addition to more obvious actions, such as ensuring that women fully participate in the policy and decision making processes, one of the effects of such approach is the establishment and deployment of telecenters that focus on women, both as consumers as well as owners or managers. Specifically, it is important to promote the deployment of telecenters in areas with low penetration rates or no access at all, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas where women make up a majority of those with no access to ICTs.

There are critical and inter-related areas in which national telecommunications policy and regulation should be designed to support telecentre deployment, such as infrastructure, tariffs or pricing policy, market restructuring and universal service/access policies. A gender perspective should be integral part of the thinking on these issues and the policy

process that leads to specific decisions. The following is a brief discussion of some of these policy options and their importance for telecentre planning and implementation processes:

- ***Universal Service/Access Obligations (USO)***: This scenario assumes that monopoly carriers and the other carriers can be required, under their USO requirements, to build out their networks and required infrastructure to areas where telecenters will be built, without charging the costs of this expansion to the telecentre itself, either directly or through tariff charges. For example, if a group of women wants to establish a telecentre in a rural area, regulators should ensure that infrastructure is not a barrier to the project and to universal access goals.
- ***Ensure that at least 50% of all telecenters are owned by women or run by women's organizations***: Policy makers involved in the telecentre implementation process should establish a policy to ensure that 50% of Telecenters are owned by women or run by women's organization. This way, one can expect that these Telecenters will most likely address the needs and demands of rural women, by providing access and the necessary programs to promote use of ICTs by women.
- ***Government subsidy, and/or integration with other infrastructure projects***: It may be possible in many instances to fund a large portion of telephone network expansion costs in connection with other public infrastructure initiatives in rural areas. If programs were being pursued to construct roads or power lines, for example, it would be highly cost-effective to combine these with telecommunications network construction at the same time. Such coordination should be planned in advance, and regulators and policy makers should ensure that they are informed of all such infrastructure projects, to maximize the efficiency for all concerned.
- ***Community tariffs***: In some countries, such as South Africa, some carriers have developed community tariffs (discounted tariffs) for certain telecenters and other public service customers, which are below the standard prices charged to other users. This type of preferential tariffs should be provided by all carriers to all community telecenters, to support the goal of affordable and universal access. Regulators should consider appropriate regulatory approaches to promote the introduction of such preferential telecentre tariffs by all telecommunications carriers.
- ***Affordable prices to all telecentre users***: Most of the services provided by telecenters will require users to pay some charge, and in many cases, these charges need to provide telecentre operators with their main source of recurring revenues. However, telecentre service prices should not be set too high, which could discourage use of their services and limit universal access. Telecentre managers should be in the best position to know what prices their market can afford, and also what charges are needed to cover operating costs. By knowing their market and costs, telecentre managers can develop creative pricing structures to ensure that all individuals, including women and girls, have access to the telecentre services. For example,

prices should be set considering the incomes of those most in need of access and should take into account gender-based income disparities.

- ***Business training programs***: Policy makers should promote and fund business training programs prior to telecentre implementation to ensure that telecenters will be professionally run and at the same time address the community it serves. In addition, and in association with the telecentre, programs should be developed to assist women and men interested in establishing their own business and on how to benefit from ICTs for their businesses (e.g., through e-commerce opportunities).

Policy makers and regulators should promote telecenters as one option to address lack of access to communication services. Indeed, policy makers can assist in the process for telecommunications development by taking proactive actions that facilitate project implementation and support. Women in Latin America deserve these opportunities and some telecentre projects in the region have shown that they can provide exactly these benefits. Therefore, telecentre projects warrant policy attention and support to ensure that they provide the necessary economic development opportunities for women in the developing world. Only then can we build a truly global information society.