

Telecentres for Universal Access: Engendered Policy Options

by Sonia N. Jorge

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), by 1996, 95 percent of households in high income or developed countries have a telephone. In contrast, only about 18 percent of the households in the rest of the world had a telephone.

The concept of community-based telecentres recently gained widespread attention as a vital response to the perpetual lack of access to information and communication technologies and services in the developing world. While telecentres 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, provide opportunities for developing societies and historically disadvantaged regions and populations to participate in the newly emerging social and economic orders.

From Universal Service to Universal Access

Universal service is traditionally defined as access to a telephone in every household. 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 Telecommunication Union (ITU), by 1996, 95 percent of households in high income or developed countries have a telephone. In contrast, only about 18 percent 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 The urban-rural disparity in developing countries is even more depressing. While about 60 percent of the population in developing countries live in rural areas, over 80 percent of the telephone lines are in urban areas.

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 the access gap (or the digital divide) has led to a recent rethinking of 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 tel-

ecommunications 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 local, regional and national information previously available only to a few.

Telecentres 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 model 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 community development.

Despite their potential, telecentres 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 centres (e.g., ensure gender equity in the implementation process, promote pricing policy that favours discounts for community telecentres' 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 on the demands of their rural and peri-urban population, and telecentres are an option worth investing on.

...women are interested in using ICTs. However, it is essential that telecentres address women's concerns and provide an adequate environment for women's participation and use.

Gender Perspectives on Telecentres

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 are supposedly more aware of community needs, gender is not an integral part of the planning equation. Although a few telecentres around the world have committed themselves to target women and women's needs, they have encountered tremendous difficulties. Most of these problems result from the lack of gender analysis and training to address the specific needs and demands of women and girls. It is crucial to invest in gender analysis and training to ensure that telecentres can appropriately respond to women's needs and demands.

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 recent paper,² there is 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; and
- ◆ Enable participation.

Telecentres that take into account these factors are more likely to attract women users, increase demand for their services and, consequently, become sustainable enterprises. Telecentres can further benefit rural women and girls and contribute to their lives in numerous ways, such as by:

- ◆ providing access to varied 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 programmes, health care information and, in some cases, actual treatment via tele-medicine programmes;
- ◆ providing a business opportunity in that many women or women's com-

munity organisations can become owners or managers of different types of community telecentres;

- ◆ creating jobs for women in telecentres, where they can participate in community development activities and better incorporate women-specific programmes within telecentre plans;
- ◆ providing community-specific or community-focused programmes, such as literacy projects, ICT training, farming information, trading information, government data, health information and projects, among others;
- ◆ providing women-specific or gender-aware programmes, 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 telecentres and to employ telecentre-trained workers; and
- ◆ providing the skills necessary for members of rural communities to begin developing their own business applications, such as community-based Internet Service Providers (ISPs), as in the United States.

Considering the possibilities, it is clear that telecentre projects must integrate gender in all stages of project development and implementation. Experiences from telecentres around the world show that:

- ◆ 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 telecentres.

Clearly, women are interested in using ICTs. However, it is essential that telecentres address women's concerns and provide an adequate environment for women's participation and use.

Engendered Policy – Impact on Telecentre Implementation

Policy makers and regulators can design universal service and universal access policies in various ways. These may be developed in connection with market restructuring efforts (such as carrier's network expansion obligations) and/or by the passage of telecommunications laws addressing these goals (by mandating development goals for the national network). Most important, 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 an approach is the establishment and deployment of telecentres that focus on women, both as consumers as well as owners or managers. Specifically, it is important to promote the deployment of

telecentres in areas with low penetration rates or no access at all, particularly in the rural and peri-urban areas where women compose a majority of those with no access to ICTs.

But the crafting of a national telecommunications policy and regulatory environment supportive of telecentre deployment should take into consideration important, inter-related areas, such as infrastructure, tariffs or pricing policy, market restructuring and universal service/access policies. The following is a brief discussion of some of these policy options and their importance to 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 telecentres will be built, without charging the costs of such 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.

- ◆ *Women's or women's organisations' ownership or management of at least 50 percent of all telecentres*: Policy makers involved in the telecentre implementation process should establish a policy to ensure

that women or women's organisations own or run 50 percent of telecentres. This way, the telecentres are more likely to provide the ICT access to women and necessary programmes that would promote women's use of ICTs.

◆ *Government subsidy, and/or integration with other infrastructure projects:* It may be possible to fund a large portion of telephone network expansion costs in connection with other public infrastructure initiatives in rural areas. The construction of roads or installation of power lines, for example, could be more cost-effective if combined with the development of a telecommunications network 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 maximise the efficiency for all concerned.

◆ *Community tariffs:* In some countries, such as South Africa, some carriers have developed community tariffs (discounted tariffs) for certain telecentres and other public service customers, which are below the prices charged to other users. These preferential tariffs should be provided in all community telecentres in support of 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 telecentres require users to pay some charge, and in many cases, these charges serve as the telecentre operators' main source of recurring revenues. However, telecentre service prices should not be set too high to discourage the use of the available 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 everyone, women and girls included, 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 programmes:* Policy makers should promote and fund business-training programmes prior to telecentre implementation to ensure that telecentres will be professionally run while meeting the community's needs. In addition, programmes should be developed to assist women and men interested in establishing their own business on how their livelihood ventures could benefit from ICTs (e.g., e-commerce opportunities).

Policy makers and regulators should promote telecentres as one option to address the lack of access to communication services. Indeed,

policy makers can assist in telecommunications development by taking proactive measures that facilitate project implementation and support. Women in developing countries deserve these opportunities, and some telecentre projects have shown that they can provide exactly these benefits. Telecentre projects therefore warrant policy attention and support so that they can provide the necessary economic development opportunities for women in the developing world. Only then can we build a truly global information society. ?

Sonia Jorge has been involved in telecommunications reform for 12 years. Her work focuses on communications policy, regulatory frameworks, universal service and universal access in the context of development, and gender analysis and awareness in the process of planning for information and communication technologies (ICTs). Raised in Angola but now based in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, Ms. Jorge is of Portuguese citizenship. She can be contacted at E-mail: <sjorge@att.net>.

* This paper is a shorter version of a paper presented at Telecom Americas 2000 - Telecom Development Symposium: Universal Access and Community Telecentres, International Telecommunication Union, 11 April 2000.

Footnotes:

¹ International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunications Development Report*, Universal Access, 1998.

² Brodman, Janice and Ambika Kapur, "Women and Telecentres," in *Telecentres Around the World*, International Telecommunication Union, forthcoming.