



# INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT BUREAU

**WORLD TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT  
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**PLENARY MEETING**

**United Nations University Institute for New Technologies (UNU/INTECH)  
and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)**

## GENDER AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS AN AGENDA FOR POLICY

### **Background**

- 1) The World Telecommunication Development Conference (Valletta, 1998), aims to address the challenges of orienting international and national telecommunications policies so that they serve the social and economic needs of developing countries. The Telecommunication Development Bureau (BDT) of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as the lead organizer of the Conference, will play a key role in ensuring that these countries share in the benefits of telecommunications development on an equitable basis with rich countries. The goal of the Conference, we believe, stems from the need and commitment to avoid exclusion. It is in the context of the very question of exclusion that this paper aims to highlight the differential needs of women and men in relation to telecommunications technologies.
- 2) In all societies, women have a role that is different from that of men. As mothers and homemakers - as well as educators, entrepreneurs and producers - women, more than men, have to play multiple roles. In poorer countries, the demands of these multiple roles place women, and particularly non-elite women, at a special disadvantage. In orienting and directing policies, therefore, it will be important to take into account the specific needs of women to ensure that they can have equitable and affordable access to facilities and services.
- 3) In this policy paper, UNU/INTECH and UNIFEM would like to highlight the reasons why, in the absence of a focused policy, the benefits of telecommunications technologies may bypass women. This may happen even if developing countries get adequate access to relevant infrastructure and service delivery.

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- 4) The rate of change in telecommunications technologies has a different effect on women and men for a number of reasons. First, in developing countries, a large proportion of people live in rural areas, where women often constitute the majority. This is mainly because women, with their special responsibilities for children and the elderly, may find it less easy than men to migrate to towns and cities. The observed urban bias in telecommunications infrastructure tends to exclude non-elite women in most developing countries. In Viet Nam, telephone connectivity is available almost exclusively in five major cities, although 80% of the population live in villages. Kampala, the capital of Uganda, has 4% of the nation's population but 60% of the share of all telephone lines. The urban bias in connectivity thus deprives women, more than men, of their universal right to communicate.
- 5) The cost of connectivity likewise excludes women, as, with limited access to finance and property, they are generally poorer than men. For example, women now constitute 60% of the world's one billion poor, and out of the 1/3 billion people living in absolute poverty, over 70% are women. The cost of obtaining a telephone line in Viet Nam is \$360 on average, when the annual per capita income is less than \$350. In Bangladesh a computer costs more than half a year's salary of an average professional. The cost of setting up email and Internet facilities is high in relation to a country's per capita income. In the evaluation, design and implementation of technologies, the quality and the cost thus should be given due consideration, but with an explicit gender perspective. There are always alternative ways of setting up telecommunications facilities. There is a choice, for example, between high bandwidth but more expensive optical fibre cables and low bandwidth but relatively inexpensive Very Small Aperture Terminals (VSATs). It will be important to assess whether cost or the quality of transmission is more relevant in the context of women's purchasing power and specific needs.
- 6) UNU/INTECH and UNIFEM believe that the question of access is important but it is equally important to acknowledge the differential impact of telecommunications development on women's paid and unpaid work, and quality of life. Deployment of telecommunications networks and the use of related services have produced marked changes in the nature of the economy and society. Research at UNU/INTECH has documented the way in which efficient and affordable telecommunications services have opened up new ways of receiving information, distance education and medical diagnoses in developing countries. The potential use of technology for the social empowerment of women, who generally have less geographical mobility than men, has been impressive. But the cost and locational bias again poses impediments to the diffusion of these facilities. For example, while many women worldwide are making effective use of Internet and email for development purposes, such as advocating and exchanging information for follow up on the Fourth World Conference of Women, it is recognized that millions of the world's poorest women still do not have access to these facilities. Thus, mechanisms will need to be developed to avoid new forms of exclusion and isolation.
- 7) The developments in technology have likewise led to business efficiency, market expansion, reduction in costs of production and, significantly, to changes in the ways of working. Employment opportunities in information processing work - particularly in the services sector - have opened up novel opportunities in some developing countries, particularly in Asia and Latin America, for women as well as for men. The share of women in software jobs in India or Brazil is around 20%. Again, the urban bias of the infrastructure makes it difficult for women in the poorer regions, and especially in the rural areas, to participate in the benefits of the new opportunities. It is in the Science and Technology Parks in cities like Bombay, Bangalore, Manila or Kuala Lumpur

that women can get these jobs. The peripheral regions, and particularly women in them, find it difficult to obtain work that depends on cost-effective, reliable and relatively high bandwidth connectivity.

8) Telematics-related distance work likewise represents a new way of working and thus new opportunities. It encompasses a wide range of modes of working, from home-based teleworking to employment in telecentres or telecottages. These modes of working offer flexibility in location and hours of employment and thus are woman-friendly. Yet, the non-availability of the right infrastructure excludes the peripheral regions from the benefits of these woman-friendly modes of working. And even if connections are brought to the more remote areas, this does not necessarily mean that women will get access to it. Technology is not gender neutral. Traditionally, for socio-cultural reasons such as limited mobility, double workload, and lower educational levels, women will not be the first in accessing, using and experimenting with these new technologies nor in benefiting from their enormous potential for employment, learning and leisure.

9) It is in this context that choice in the mode of deregulation becomes important. It becomes significant, for example, to appraise whether making universal service a condition of entry for private telecommunication companies will give women greater connectivity. On the other hand, such a principle may reduce competition and thus increase the price of telephoning. As with infrastructure, there are always choices, but these need to be evaluated in the context of the relative economic and social needs, and power, of women and men.

10) Changes in telecommunications technology have led to fresh entrepreneurial activities among women in some developing countries. In Accra, Ghana, there has been a growth of business centres that offer services such as fax and email. The owners of these centres are women and often the clients are women as well. As a country that is well known for the trading acumen of women, it has given a new business outlet for their expertise. In India the fax and telephone kiosks have created a space for self employment for women and men. Yet, the phenomenon has been exclusively an urban one. With one or two notable exceptions (e.g. the hiring out of the use of solar phones by rural women in Bangladesh), the opportunities have eluded those who live far away from the big towns and cities. The technology exists to bring ICT to every corner of the world, to support the alleviation of poverty and the process of sustainable human development, but it can not be taken for granted that this will reach the people who are most in need.

### **Reasons for ITU to incorporate gender in its work**

11) It is against the background of women's specific role in the economy and society, that UNU/INTECH and UNIFEM will urge ITU to incorporate gender into its work. The validity of taking gender as an important dimension in ITU's developmental work arises for a number of reasons.

12) First, distributive justice requires that women should participate in the telecommunications driven information society on an equitable basis. Considerations of equity and distributive justice, however, often conflict with the commercial criteria of efficiency and profitability. In a period of rapid deregulation and privatization, extending connectivity to urban peripheries and rural areas will be feasible and sustainable only when the initiatives are commercially viable. However, one can argue that technological changes themselves could be used to promote economic and social empowerment of women and thereby resulting in the enlargement of the market for equipment and service deliveries. (For example in Latin America, Internet use has grown by 788% between 1995 to 1997, with women, especially from the middle and higher socio-economic classes, representing an important and growing user-group.) Further, the facilities of the Internet, for example, can become

accessible and commercially viable if used on a collective basis. Thus, for instance, Drik, an NGO in Dhaka, acts as the leading, though unofficial, email provider. With low cost, albeit low bandwidth, connectivity, it acts as an electronic post office, offering cheap solutions to women's and men's need for information and communication at an affordable price.

13) The dimension of gender is important also for a country's capacity building. Research undertaken by UNU/INTECH revealed that there is a prevalent gender pattern of employment in telecommunications-related companies, where it is common to see women at the lower end of the skills pyramid. In the era of knowledge-intensive modes of production, facilitated by telecommunications development, it will be strategic to mobilize the untapped cognitive skills of women for complex managerial and technological tasks. It is in the light of the importance of cognitive skills for sustainable development that a gender focus on recruitment, training, operational policies and practices of the companies in the telecommunications sector will be necessary.

14) Finally, the dimension of gender should be given an explicit emphasis in ITU's work in the light of the UN's overall commitment to integrate a gender perspective in the policies and programmes of the UN system. It is in the spirit of this mandate that the UN system, in cooperation with civil society organizations, has taken various actions towards the goal of achieving gender equality. In the field of telecommunications, progress so far has been limited. The Beijing Platform for Action, a set of agendas adopted after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, makes recommendations for women's access to media, electronic press and other communication and broadcast services – and includes some important references to the need for increasing women's participation in decision-making and use of new information technologies (see para. J, Women and Media, Platform for Action and Beijing Declaration, 1995). Implementation of these recommendations is now the challenge.

15) Various international agencies have already started making inroads into the field of gender and telecommunication. The Global Knowledge Conference, held in Toronto in 1997 (organized by UNDP and the World Bank), provided women for the first time with a platform to advocate for an increase in share in the benefits of the new information technology revolution, as well as to argue for connectivity for all. The United Nations Development Programme has recently started a pilot project in Egypt, where a technology community access centre will be set up, with the aim of creating new jobs, sustaining livelihoods, and enhancing communication, education and popular participation, especially for women, youth and unemployed people. UNIFEM, through its involvement in the Once and Future Action Network (the international advocacy network on gender, science and technology which strives for people centred science and technology development) is also concerned about women's participation in and benefits from the new technological revolution, and is developing projects to implement the Beijing PFA. UNIFEM and INTECH are working together to expand on their project on gender and new technologies undertaken in Asia in the early 1990s and to replicate this in other regions. ITU as the key agency in setting the policy framework for telecommunications infrastructure now needs to enter the gender and telecommunications arena.

16) Our policy paper adds to previous UN and civil society advocacy work by emphasizing the significance of gender in designing, implementing and delivering telecommunications infrastructure and services. The paper also urges ITU to acknowledge the importance of mobilizing women's cognitive skills in building technological capacities in telematics-related industries.

### **Ways of incorporating gender awareness**

17) There are three key sets of actions which the ITU, Member States and Sector Members should undertake to successfully incorporate gender into telecommunications policies. These actions will require cooperation and consultation with all the major stakeholders in telecommunications development processes, namely governments, private sector and civil society including trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international networks.

18) First, take action to ensure that all stakeholders are made aware of the significance of gender for the development of telecommunications and the realization of positive impacts of these developments. Gendered division of labour, human rights violations and differential access to resources vary across and within countries; careful assessment and analysis are required to understand the specifics of how gender as social structure will affect telecommunications development in any particular context.

19) Second, encourage and facilitate the participation of all stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of telecommunications policies and development programmes. By reducing or removing barriers to women's active participation in decision-making processes and to career mobility within the telecommunications industry itself, a greater number of formally disenfranchised women will have a stake in bringing about telecommunications development.

20) Finally, by supporting the formulation and implementation of policies which take specific account of the differential needs of women when they exist and which direct technical and financial resources to meeting those needs. For example, because of the differential in incomes between men and women, particularly in developing countries, policies which support focused research and development aimed at delivering cost-effective technological solutions will benefit women who are less able than men to afford expensive services. Many women live lives which integrate very little with the formal market economy and therefore in designing policies, ITU and national governments will need to be creative to reach beyond the market economy. While such initiatives will undoubtedly benefit women by increasing their participation in telecommunications change, it will also benefit other marginalized groups who share features with poor women in developing countries. To achieve this ambitious objective of integrating gender concerns with telecommunications development policies and programmes, the ITU should recognize that it may be required to support Member States who have a desire to introduce gender-aware policies but lack the planning expertise and specialized skills to undertake the research and policy design to effect these objectives. Technical support may be required and can be sourced from other UN agencies, academic institutions, government agencies and NGOs.

### **A framework for action**

19) We urge the International Telecommunication Union, its Member States and Sector Members to work in collaboration with all stakeholders to undertake the following programme of action:

- a) Identify mechanisms for integrating gender-analysis into the ITU's initiative to develop a charter for a Universal Right to Communicate. There are significant gender disparities in definition of human rights, frameworks for protection of rights and policing rights violations. These gender disparities can lead to disenfranchisement and must be taken into account when formulating the Universal Right to Communicate. The ITU should work with the well-established and skilled women's human rights international networks and other specialists to better understand how women's rights can be accommodated and protected.

- b) Collaborate with UNIFEM, UNU-INTECH and other bodies such as gender and communications NGOs and gender, science and technology networks in the project design, planning, programming and execution of telecommunications and development projects. Such projects would include, but not be limited to, the following projects in the current ITU/D workplan:
- multipurpose community telecommunications centres;
  - telecoms and the environment;
  - distance education;
  - telemedicine;
  - telecommunications and trade.
- c) Jointly work with UNIFEM, UNU-INTECH and the UN Statistical Division to develop gender-desegregated statistical indicators for the BDT and ITU statistical series. Devise strategies for developing gender-aware human resource development strategies at every level of ITU-D's programming and operations including the important area of training.
- d) Integrate UNIFEM, UNU-INTECH and other organizations, including gender and development NGOs, into the work of the ITU-D study groups, particularly those concerned with understanding and analysing the socio-economic impact of telecommunications development.
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