



INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT BUREAU

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PLENARY MEETING

Canadian International Development Agency

GENDER EQUITY, TELECOMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT AND THE ITU

Executive summary

As noted by the Buenos Aires declaration at the 1994 World Telecommunication Development Conference, "Telecommunication is an essential component of political, economic, social and cultural development". As the carrier of the global information society and economy, telecommunications are transforming local, national and international life.

The social transformations brought about by telecommunications and the information economy do not affect men and women in the same way. In all cultures of the world, women and men have clearly defined roles and responsibilities according to a socially-defined gender division of labour. Women play a central role in socio-economic development through their triple role of productive, reproductive and community management responsibilities which differ from the predominantly productive role of men. As a result of their differing roles and responsibilities, women and men have varying needs and priorities to take full advantage of socio-economic development opportunities. By recognizing the needs and perspectives of women as well as men in the planning of telecommunications systems, this will ensure active participation of women and lead to the improvement of the sector's effectiveness in contributing to socio-economic development. Additional benefits include:

Women possess skills and creativity deriving from their perspectives and abilities which constitute a valuable resource for development of the telecommunications sector.

Women potentially constitute over 50% of consumers of telecommunications, as owners of SMEs and in the course of fulfilling their reproductive responsibilities.

However, few telecommunications projects have targeted women, noted the impacts on women of telecommunications systems and technologies, or incorporated their perspectives and needs.

It is well documented that when women have access to telecommunications, they are able to support a variety of productive and reproductive tasks, including entrepreneurship and management of SMEs. For example, women entrepreneurs in urban centres use ICTs for their SMEs. Internet and CD ROM have been used by rural women to gain literacy and agricultural skills. The telephone has long been used by women around the world as a vital link for exchanging information, providing

emotional support and networks, soliciting advice in managing tasks from childcare to health to relationships, and supporting their entrepreneurial activities. Telecommunications can also support the transfer of knowledge women already possess. Much indigenous, traditional knowledge in developing countries is held by women, which has been used in the invention of day-to-day technology to support social wellbeing.

Appropriate universal access strategies for women would include considerations of cost, expertise in operations and maintenance, women's communications networks, and time. Radio broadcasting and telecentres are particularly useful strategies, especially for rural areas. Many innovative activities and models for telecommunications networks are being developed by NGOs. However, it cannot be assumed that women's concerns will be reflected in NGOs without a strong and active women's component and women staff members. Women's NGOs can be important partners to address issues such as training, illiteracy and lack of finances.

This paper deals with the importance of gender implications in telecommunications development, particularly in developing countries, and argues that the provision of access to telecommunications services in an equitable manner to women and men will contribute further to overall socio-economic development.

Specific Recommendations for the ITU to consider:

At this second World Telecommunications Development Conference in Malta, while the ITU is preparing its work plan for the next four years, it is hoped that the ITU will:

- 1) Recognize gender as a cross-cutting issue, understanding that ensuring equitable access to telecommunications for women as users and providers will strengthen the contribution of the sector to social and economic development.
- 2) Ensure that telecommunications meets the needs of both women and men and provides equitable access for both women and men. This includes taking into account women's special training, language and access needs. Specific, targeted initiatives to address women's constraints and gaps in access are important.
- 3) Encourage partnerships with women and women's NGOs at all stages of telecommunications planning, design and delivery.

Gender equality, telecommunication development and the ITU

As noted by the Buenos Aires declaration at the 1994 World Telecommunication Development Conference, "Telecommunications is an essential component of political, economic, social and cultural development". As the carrier of the global information society and economy, telecommunications are transforming local, national and international life.

1 Background

The social transformations brought about by telecommunications and the information economy do not affect men and women in the same way. In all cultures of the world, women and men have clearly defined roles and responsibilities according to a socially-defined gender division of labour. Women play a central role in socio-economic development through their triple role of productive, reproductive and community management responsibilities which differ from the predominantly productive role of men. As a result of their differing roles and responsibilities, women and men have varying needs and priorities to take full advantage of socio-economic development opportunities. By recognizing the needs and perspectives of women as well as men in the planning of telecommunications systems, this will ensure active participation of women and lead to the

improvement of the sector's effectiveness in contributing to socio-economic development. Additional benefits include:

Women possess skills and creativity deriving from their perspectives and abilities which constitute a valuable resource for development of the telecommunications sector.

Women potentially constitute over 50% of consumers of telecommunications, as owners of SMEs and in the course of fulfilling their reproductive responsibilities.

Expanding access to telecommunications could be an opportunity to redress the negative impact on women of many past socio-economic development approaches, by facilitating access to the information and technology resources they need to improve their situation. Historically, women have been marginalized from access to new technological developments. The UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development has noted that technical change aimed at benefiting people in rural areas in developing countries appears to have benefited men more than women. To date telecommunications systems have followed this pattern of marginalizing women. Few telecommunications projects have targeted women, noted the impacts on women of telecommunications systems and technologies, or explicitly incorporated their perspectives and needs.

2 Women's potential to contribute to telecommunications

The UN Conference on Population and Development (September 1994), the World Summit for Social Development (March 1995), the World Conference on Women (September 1995) and the Gender Working Group, UNCSTD (1995) have recognized that women are central to development, and further, that the advancement of women equals the advancement of society. The United Nations has committed to mainstreaming a gender perspective into all areas of its work, in particular in areas such as macro economic questions, operational activities for development, poverty reduction, human rights, humanitarian assistance, budgeting, disarmament, peace and security, and legal and political matters. The World Bank has found that "if you educate a man, you're only educating that one man, but if you educate a woman, you're educating a family and a nation".

It is well documented that when women have access to telecommunications, they are able to support a variety of productive and reproductive tasks, including entrepreneurship and management of SMEs. For example, women entrepreneurs in urban centres use ICTs for their SMEs. Internet and CD ROM have been used by rural women to gain literacy and agricultural skills. The telephone has long been used by women around the world as a vital link for exchanging information, providing emotional support and networks, soliciting advice in managing tasks from childcare to health to relationships, and supporting their entrepreneurial activities. Telecommunications can also support the transfer of knowledge women already possess. Much indigenous, traditional knowledge in developing countries is held by women, which has been used in the invention of day-to-day technology to support social well-being.

When women, as well as men, are actively involved in the definition and identification of their information needs, and in the selection and creation of delivery systems, women can gain important access to information. These insights can be used to address problems in their communities by facilitating analysis of their situation and the creation of responsive strategies, as well as increase the rate of socio-economic development.

Strengthening institutional capacity to integrate gender considerations in policies and programs and supporting women's equitable access to training is required to ensure that telecommunications address women's needs and concerns more effectively. At the same time, increasing the number of

women skilled in design and management will contribute to more efficient human resources development and to the effectiveness of the sector.

3 Constraints to women's access to telecommunications

Despite the benefits to socio-economic development of women's access to telecommunications, constraints prevent women's access to and benefit from these technologies. The ability of the telecommunications sector to contribute to socio-economic development can be enhanced by recognizing and implementing strategies to overcome these constraints. While full solutions do not lie solely within the telecommunications sector, the recognition of gender concerns in designing effective telecommunications services can contribute to more equitable and sustainable development. Constraints include:

a) Poor or inappropriate infrastructure and technologies:

- appropriate telecommunications technologies are not always available, e.g. technologies can be priced out of the range of or overly complex for the needs of entrepreneurs, especially women, who tend to operate at the small- and micro-enterprise level and have limited resources for investment in equipment and training;
- the heavy burden of productive and domestic tasks which fall on women severely limits their time so telecommunications must be pertinent to their daily tasks, and accessible in the course of the daily or weekly schedule for women to invest any of their time in using or training for new technologies or telecommunication systems;
- the majority of women in developing countries live in rural areas, which are poorly serviced by infrastructure such as telephone lines and electricity;
- literacy rates for women remain consistently lower than for men by about 30% in developing countries, and the literacy rate for young women in rural areas is 2-3 times lower than in urban areas which can be a barrier to training in telecommunication use and development.

b) Training and education:

- women have less access to education and training for social, cultural and economic reasons;
- those who continue in school tend to stay in socially accepted, non-technological streams considered compatible with their reproductive role and these barriers to science and technology education and technical training for girls and women exist at all educational levels;
- in many societies women are considered congenitally incapable of grasping scientific or technical concepts despite the experiential science and technology they engage in daily;
- social taboos governing interaction with men who are not family members restrict women's access to training and facilities.

c) Women's communication networks:

- telecommunications systems often fail to include women's communication networks, based on kinship and community task sharing, which are critical community information systems;
- this situation restricts the distribution of information within the community.

d) Representation in telecommunications systems:

- although some progress has been achieved, women are poorly represented at the institutional levels of provision, training, telecommunications development, implementation and management;
- advancement is limited, whereby women do not have the same access to technical training and education in design and management of telecommunications systems.

4 Gender equality considerations and the ITU: Overcoming constraints to women's use of telecommunications

Encouraging women's access to telecommunications by designing strategies to overcome the constraints identified above will allow the sector to contribute more effectively to socio-economic development. Furthermore, planning telecommunications with women's and men's concerns in mind and building on the skills of women as users, designers, implementors and employees will make the sector more effective.

When women are actively involved in the definition and identification of their information needs, and in the selection and creation of systems to deliver information, they will have access to information which will benefit themselves, their families and their communities. Such information will also enable them to address problems in their communities by facilitating analysis of their situation and the creation of responsive strategies.

CASE STUDY: GRAMEEN PHONE COMPANY

Laili Begum, 27, took advantage of a loan from the Grameen Phone company in Dhaka, Bangladesh (part of the Grameen Bank) to sell telephone services in her community. She borrowed \$430 for a cellular phone and is repaying the loan at a rate of \$3.50 a week. Calls cost her 4 taka - 8 cents - a minute, and she charges 5 taka, taking the difference as profit. She said she made about \$4.50 a day in the first three days.

CASE STUDY: THE AURAT FOUNDATION IN PAKISTAN

Its programme "Reaching out to Women through Radio" establishes village Radio Listening Centres as a means of providing information to women and enabling them to get together to discuss their work and issues of common concern. Many of these groups have taken action to solve common problems and concerns. A series of highly popular radio programmes produced by the Foundation provided information on solving problems related to women's agricultural work – seed varieties, growing methods and animal diseases – all through the story line of a soap opera.

5 ITU's role in overcoming constraints for women

The importance of human resources development and participation at the community level in telecommunications systems is recognized in the ITU Final Report of the Buenos Aires Conference. However the strategies to promote equity between women and men in access to and benefits from information and communications technologies (ICTs) need to be articulated. It cannot be assumed in the implementation of ITU/BDT programmes that equitable access to and benefits from telecommunications for women will occur naturally. Successful strategies include:

- approaches that take into account differing impacts on women and men;

- women as well as men actively participate in and are consulted at all levels of agenda definition and implementation, including management, design, implementation, employment and access;
 - women receive the appropriate training and education to support their participation in all levels and sectors of telecommunications systems.
- a) Specific Recommendations for the ITU to consider:**
- 1) Recognize gender as a cross-cutting issue, understanding that ensuring equitable access to telecommunications for women as users and providers will strengthen the contribution of the sector to social and economic development.
 - 2) Ensure that telecommunications meets the needs of both women and men and provides equitable access for both women and men. This includes taking into account women's special training, language and access needs. Specific, targeted initiatives to address women's constraints and gaps in access are important.
 - 3) Encourage partnerships with women and women's NGOs at all stages of telecommunications planning, design and delivery.

b) Specific strategies for the ITU:

Study Groups

- The ITU should encourage equitable representation of women in working parties in order to help shape agendas and examine the gender equality considerations in each of its Questions, including access, impact and needs identification.
- Synthesized information on the role of telecommunications in social and economic development should include the increasing amount of information on women's use of telecommunications, and, wherever possible, quantified information on the economic value of women's informal sector, subsistence agricultural and community management activities.

Policy and strategy issues

- i) The "right to communicate", universal access including rural development, and the LDCs
The issue of universal access is critical for women to ensure a means of participating in the information society. The following are examples of appropriate universal access strategies which could address key constraints for women, including cost, expertise in operations and maintenance, using existing communications networks, and recognizing time limitations.
- ii) Radio broadcasting can be an important universal access technology for much of the developing world, so long as:
 - programming is available in indigenous languages;
 - indigenous women's communication networks are supported;
 - programme schedules are determined by women's time availability;
 - where electricity is undependable and costly, alternatives such as wind-up radios are considered (see box below);
 - women are consulted concerning programme content and are represented in programmes.

CASE STUDY: THE FREEPLAY "WIND-UP RADIO"

The wind-up radio requires no electricity or batteries. Thirty seconds of hand-winding activates a spring that drives a generator to provide electricity for one hour of radio - either AM, FM or shortwave. In Eritrea, these radios are supplied by British ODA to the Ministry of Education for mass education. The radios are distributed to formal educational "listening centres" to provide distance learning and information for millions of people through a new adult education radio channel. The listeners are people who would not normally be able afford to run a radio as the price of batteries would overstretch the limits of the family budget.

iii) Telecentres

The telecentre is a potentially useful way of facilitating women's access to telecommunications in support of their SME activities and their reproductive information needs, especially in rural areas. However, to ensure that telecentres will benefit women, the following issues need to be taken into account:

Availability of women staff members and trainers to help women use the technologies.

It is important to establish telecommunications systems in centres or locations where women have other tasks or are taking advantage of available resources (i.e. health centres, libraries, women's NGOs, etc.) in order to avoid increased pressure on women's time.

Telecentres can provide distance education and health services to help overcome constraints of time, space and resources.

Since women have less access to English language training, to encourage training in telecommunications and the information provided by telecommunications could be made available in local languages.

iv) Technology appropriate to women's situation

In developing telecommunications delivery systems for women, questions need to be asked about the appropriateness of the technologies implemented in terms of cost, complexity, maintenance (especially in rural areas) and timeline for implementation. The applicability of information conveyed through appropriate delivery systems to women's day-to-day responsibilities will add to the potential for women to consider participating and utilizing new technologies. For example: It is not necessary to wait for high tech. solutions which in some cases could limit access. The installation of a single 4 kHz telephone line can open up a plethora of possibilities e.g. tele-education, health services, radio broadcasting, Internet access, etc.

v) Partnerships:

Effective partnerships with NGOs which extend beyond disaster relief and mitigation to include a range of project development, implementation and delivery systems can contribute to the effectiveness and range of telecommunications systems. Many innovative activities and models for telecommunications networks are being developed by NGOs which contribute to improved consultation, human resource development, and incorporating gender equality considerations.

However, it cannot be assumed that NGOs will automatically understand and support gender equity concerns. Women are not represented in many mainstream NGOs and institutions, so their concerns will not be properly reflected. Partnerships with NGOs that have demonstrated active and strong women's components are preferable. As well, there are increasing numbers of women's NGOs at national, regional and international levels which are addressing these issues in innovative and productive ways.

Women's NGOs can be important partners to address related issues such as illiteracy and lack of finances. "Delivery systems" can overcome these barriers by distributing information obtained via telecommunications through the larger community, using diverse means such as newsletters, town meetings, street theater, etc. They could also provide a vehicle for information moving the opposite way, from local women to other communities and nations via telecommunications. Women's NGOs can also provide an ongoing framework for access, distribution and support. The capacity of women NGOs working in local or national level communications and media would provide a strong base of experience in developing, packaging and distributing information which reaches women (see Annex 1 for a list of potential UN and other donor agency partners).

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ANNEX 1

Partnerships with UN and donor organisations

There are several UN, governmental and donor initiatives addressing gender equality considerations in telecommunications which could provide expertise, project models and collaboration to the ITU. These include:

- UNIFEM's Programme on New Technologies.
- The UNU Institute for New Technologies (UNU/INTECH) project on Gender, ICTs and Development.
- WomenWatch, a joint initiative of three entities in the UN system specifically devoted to women's issues: the Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women is a gateway to UN information and data on women worldwide and an evolving forum on global women's issues in the follow-up to the FWCW.
- UNESCO/Society for International Development project: "Women on the Net: a multi-cultural perspective on international communication systems" aims to introduce multicultural gender perspective to the on-going work of women on the Internet.
- International Development Research Centre (IDRC): ACACIA gender framework for the introduction of ICTs in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- UNECA Conference in Addis Ababa in April/May 1998 on "Forging Partnerships for Africa's Future: Gender Perspectives".

ANNEX 2

CIDA's gender equity policy

As stated in the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) Gender Equity Policy, CIDA is committed to promoting the full and effective integration of gender equity considerations into all Agency supported initiatives. The Policy also promotes the participation of women as equal and active partners in development. The Agency aims to foster and encourage women's participation beyond targeting women as beneficiaries to ensuring that women are also participating in decision-making at all levels including shaping and influencing the policies, programs and projects that affect them.