

Chapter 9

“The Men Never Say that They do not Know”: Telecentres as Gendered Spaces

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ABSTRACT

There have been many case studies in the literature on telecentres, often seeking to analyse the usage of these facilities via surveys and covering gender issues by “counting women”. This chapter presents a more qualitative and ethnographic account, exploring one particular telecentre in a small town in rural Chile and comparing it with the seven local commercial cybercafés. This local reality is situated in the context of Chile’s national ICT strategy, the Agenda Digital, and linked to interviews with policy makers at the national level. The chapter examines the Chilean telecentre strategy, in particular the Biblioredes programme. The primary research included a short survey at the telecentre, on users’ age, gender, occupation, education, access habits and usages, but even more revealing is six months’ participant observation and interviews with users. The analysis confirmed availability, affordability and skills as important factors in determining internet usage, but also uncovered two other key issues: social norms around the use of time and of space. These social norms are heavily gendered. Social norms around time usage mean that married women struggle to fit in IT trainings with household duties. As far as space is concerned, it is far more socially acceptable for women to spend time in the telecentre than in cybercafés. In the commercial cybercafés, computers are placed in narrow cabins and screens are not publicly visible. There is little interaction between users, who are almost exclusively young men. The telecentre is situated in the local library, run by a female librarian and used as a social space by women of different ages. The space is wide enough for prams and wheelchairs and the screens are publicly visible. Users, often less affluent members of the community and/or women, are socially in a position to ask the staff questions, while men’s higher social status makes it harder for them to seek help with their IT skills learning. The

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chapter concludes with some practical recommendations for designing access spaces and IT training courses in a gender-sensitive way which may apply to rural Chile and other heavily gendered societies. It also calls for a more nuanced analysis of gender aspects in ICT4D research, one that goes beyond simply “counting women”.

INTRODUCTION

Telecentres are among the best documented aspects of the growing field of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). These public access points to the internet, which offer computer and internet use free of cost to the user, have become part of many national ICT strategies in Latin America. In many cases, months or years after the telecentres’ installation, studies have been carried out to see what kind of users were taking advantage of the facility and what kind of use they made of it. The majority of these studies have been based on quantitative surveys of users. From a gender perspective, the key concern in such studies has been the gender balance among users – “counting women”. This chapter reports the findings of a much more qualitative, ethnographic study of a telecentre in rural Chile. The study is part of a larger piece of research (Kleine, 2007) which included six months of qualitative social research comparing the intentions of policy makers in the Chilean capital with the daily realities of people in some of the poorest municipalities in Chile. Based on a subset of observations and interview data, the chapter offers a holistic understanding of the way informal social norms affect men and women’s usage of the telecentre. The chapter works with a wider conceptualisation of access, which recognises not only the three dimensions of access as outlined by Gerster & Zimmermann (2003) as availability, affordability and capabilities necessary to use ICTs. It argues that if men and women are to have equal access to ICTs, the gender-based norms around the use of time and the use of space also need to be addressed.

After explaining the situation of Chile as one of the leaders in e-readiness and active state ICT policy in Latin America in general, this chapter will take the reader to the small town in one of the poorest areas of Chile where the research was conducted. Dimensions of access and the effects of public ICT agendas are explored from a gender-aware point of view. The case study of one particular female microentrepreneur will be used to see ICTs in the broader context of women’s lives in the small town. The conclusion will offer some aspects to consider, in regards to gender, in further enquiry and policy making around telecentres in Latin America and beyond.

BACKGROUND TO ICTS IN CHILE

Chile was among the first countries in Latin America to formulate a broad national strategy with regard to ICT, a move instigated by successive centre-left governments. The *Agenda Digital* was intended to support both the government’s neoliberal macroeconomic agenda and its more social-democratic aims to ensure that the benefits of ICTs would be shared by all Chileans.

Chile was arguably the first experiment of neoliberal reform (Harvey 2005) when, after the military coup in 1973, the Pinochet regime, guided by economists from the Chicago School, deregulated the national economy and sought to integrate the country into global trade (Cademartori, 2001). The same macroeconomic ideology saw investment in research, development and innovation as primarily the domain of the private sector, so technological change was not state-induced (Díaz & Rivas, 2005). The democratic centre-left governments that followed after 1990, on the other

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