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The Role of Traditional Libraries in the Skills Acquisition of Underrepresented Women

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Access to information and technology is a necessary tool for the advancement of individuals, communities and societies as a whole. For women in particular, unrestricted access to information is necessary not only for the acquisition of skills, but for their empowerment as individuals. In an increasingly technical, computer literate society, women returning to the workforce, poor women, and women in developing countries must be afforded the opportunity to obtain the skills necessary to use these tools to secure employment as well as improve their lives. In her speech at the World Bank and IMF Joint Library Meeting, Dr. Joan Challinor makes the point,

“[T]hese women cannot benefit from laws of which they are unaware, laws which would help them in the workplace, in getting and keeping property, and in voting for officials who would serve them in their governments, and, most importantly, the ability to see that laws already on the books are truly enforced. Without the basic information on how to limit the number of children they will bear, women will forever face life as third-class citizens. Without this information, these women are as powerless within their families as they are in the larger culture.”¹

The connection between poverty, illiteracy and lack of access to information and technology has been firmly established. The United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 1997 states simply, "Poverty also means a short life, lack of basic education, and limited or no access to public and private resources." Due in part, to social and cultural conventions, as well as economic factors, women more so than men are likely to be illiterate and poor, two thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women.² Therefore, the issue of not only providing access to information, but instruction in the use of information and technology is essential for improving the quality of life for underrepresented women.

According to the United Nations Statement of the Administrative Committee On Coordination on Universal Access to Basic Communication and Information Services; globally, the information and communication sector is already expanding at twice the rate of the world economy.³ As the world moves toward a global economy, technology and information become increasingly important to all the people of the world, leaving the women of developing countries at a significant disadvantage. As a result of the lack of infrastructure, economic capability, social and cultural conventions, access for women in developing countries is severely restricted.

Necessary for advances in information and technology are electricity and telecommunications—developing countries lack this infrastructure. In terms of telecommunications, the 59 lowest income countries (which account for about 56 per cent of the world's population) share only 7 per cent of the world's telephone mainlines. Excluding China and India, the 57 lowest income countries (which together account for one fifth of the world's population) have one hundredth of the global telephone mainlines.⁴ Due to this lack of infrastructure, 85% of Internet users live in developed countries, home to less than 15% of the world's population.⁵

In addition to the economic barriers these women face, they may also face physical barriers, while 95.7% of libraries in the United States are connected to the internet, women in poor countries may not even have access to a library. Women make up 60% of the population in rural areas where it may be impossible to even walk to a library.

Perhaps the most difficult of barriers for these women to overcome are social and cultural conventions. Gender stereotypes, domestic and familial duties, application of gender-biased law, customary laws, tradition and dominant social attitudes and domestic violence may all contribute to the inability of women to access information. Infrastructure can be developed, buildings and roads can be constructed, however, there is a delicate balance between offering women access to knowledge while at the same time respecting their culture.

While women in developed countries may not share the same concerns as women in underdeveloped countries, they still face significant hurdles. Women who are returning to work via the welfare to work program, upon release from prison, or older women forced back into the workforce are concerned with financial issues, childcare, transportation, domestic violence and social perceptions and pressures. Access to information and technology would benefit these women in their struggle for better lives.

Women who are leaving welfare have many issues that, through the acquisition of skills, could be resolved. Women who leave welfare tend to be in poor health, have children who are unhealthy, have a low basic skill level and suffer from substance abuse or depression.⁶ Many of these women are dependent on case workers for information regarding their eligibility for food, medical and employment assistance.⁷ In addition to health concerns, women returning to work from the welfare rolls must have transportation, childcare and the self-confidence to become and remain employed.

According to the Department of Justice, there are currently over 94,000 women incarcerated in the United States,⁸ 58% of them have not graduated from high school.⁹ These women when released from prison will likely return to poor urban neighborhoods, unskilled, frustrated and now unable to receive food stamps, housing or federal student aid. Bearing the weight of the stigma of being a felon, where do they turn to break the cycle of poverty and abuse?

Traditional libraries can be the answer to the dearth of information services and technology for underrepresented women. Research shows that patrons use library computers to conduct research, write resumes, keep in touch with family and friends and complete assignments for school or work.¹⁰ It is necessary for the knowledge of programs be made available to those who will benefit from them the most. Making unsophisticated users aware of the beneficial programs available to them can help change the perception of the traditional library. Underprivileged women may not know that they can come to the library and take a free class on using the Internet, using the computer or on how to write a resume. For example, the New York Public Library is currently offering classes on Email Basics, Internet Basics, Windows Basics, Aprenda a Usar el Raton, and Introduction to Computers. The knowledge that these programs exist, free of charge, can broaden the perception of what libraries have to offer.

Key to the success of empowering underrepresented women is the creation of a safe, comfortable environment. The librarian must be sympathetic and unbiased, friendly but not condescending in order to assist the hesitant patron and ensure her success. Professionalism is vital for the effective librarian, a model of equality and equanimity, she is essential to creating an environment where even the most tentative patron will gain confidence. Clearly, the programs to assist women are in place, via free classes that are offered, access to computers and the Internet, as well as reference books and materials. According to a recent Marist Institute study, Americans believe that providing computers for public use is one of the three most important things a library can do. Beyond high patron satisfaction and demand, the technology has revitalized libraries. Nationwide, total visits to the library have increased by more than 17 percent between 1996 and 2001.¹¹

The distinction must be made between information and technology— information is defined as knowledge acquired or derived, while technology is defined as the application of knowledge. Not only is it important for underserved women to have access to information, they must be educated in the application of the information. The acquisition of knowledge in itself, while valuable, is not necessarily productive. Therefore, access to information is the beginning step in the journey to confident use of technology. Many women who have not had access to information in the past, or are unfamiliar with current technology may be intimidated by the perceived complexity of the

tasks before them. The assistance of a skilled librarian in a nonthreatening atmosphere may help in making the learning process less daunting.

In order to advance information access in rural and underdeveloped areas, there are programs in place to bring libraries to those areas where they are needed. The IFLA ALP Programme was developed to bring such advances to those areas. The mission of ALP is to further the library profession, library institutions and library and information services in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean.¹² UNESCO, The World Library Partnership, the Canadian Library Association's Interest group on the Third World, among others, are similar programs which have a global perspective with regard to librarianship. These programs not only are supporting access to information technology, they are focusing on the integration of the information and technology. According to Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."¹³ Traditional libraries are the vehicle by which underrepresented women can realize their right as human beings to acquire the information and technology essential to their personal and social growth. Armed with the information they seek as well as the knowledge to use and integrate the technology, disadvantaged women will be empowered with the essential tools for educated decision making.

¹ Joan R. Challinor, Ph.D, World Bank and IMF Joint Library Meeting, October 11, 2000.

² United Nations Statistics Division. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/ww2000/edu2000.htm>

³ <http://acc.unsytem.org/-documents/jointstatements/9724387e.pdf>

⁴ <http://acc.unsytem.org/-documents/jointstatements/9724387e.pdf>

⁵ Modern ICTs. <http://www.itdg.org/html/icts/expertise.htm>

⁶ www.urban.org

⁷ London, Andrew, John Martinez, Denise Polit. The Health of Poor Urban Women. Project on Devolution and Urban Change.

⁸ Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002.

⁹ www.prisonactivist.org

¹⁰ "Toward Equality of Access: The Role of Public Libraries in Addressing the Digital Divide," Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

¹¹ "Toward Equality of Access: The Role of Public Libraries in Addressing the Digital Divide," Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

¹² IFLA Core Activity for the Advancement of Librarianship. ifla.org

¹³ United Nations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19.