



# Women And Phones: A Complex Relationship

*We need to recognise that the development of good quality affordable domestic services is probably more important than those for business, as the telephone cables hold the social fabric together*

The Phone Ballot, WETTANK flyer, Bulletin No.1

**As Australia goes to the polls - to vote, not for political parties, but for a telecommunications carrier - a timely research study has reinforced earlier research showing the central role of the phone in the lives of Australian women, and the major social and economic costs which could flow from any further restrictions, particularly cost restrictions, on women's access to telephone services.**

Sydney research consultants Distaff Associates, with funding from the Telecom Fund for Social and Policy Research, conducted a series of focus groups involving women with a wide range of age, lifestyles, work experience and locations.

The research confirmed existing data that men and women use the phone differently, in particular that women use it more often and make longer calls. But it also emphasised that the calls women make are essential for social cohesion and the functioning of the family. The consultants believe that women's access to phones saves the Government and the community from major demands for extra services, and have provided estimates of the costs which could be involved if this access were reduced.

## Ballot Concern for Women

The consultants have identified a major cause for concern in the ballot process, in that where a couple have a phone, the subscriber in the majority of cases is likely to be a man. There is no mechanism for women in this situation to have a say in the poll.

Even though men may claim they are minor users, their role as subscriber makes them 'boss of the phone'. Yet this project and other data shows that women often use the phone on the man's behalf as well as for their own purposes, to arrange and manage the household and family relationships.

The study challenges the traditional market division of domestic/business, which also tends to be equated with female/male. The consultants say that the use of phones can be divided into many categories which cross the lines between commercial and private functions.

The current ballot is essentially about competition on the 'thick' STD routes (primarily between major capitals). Those who stand to benefit most from choosing one carrier or the other are clearly businesses with considerable telecommunications traffic along these routes.

This research suggests that women are probably least likely to see the benefits of competition. Many of the women who most depend on the tel-

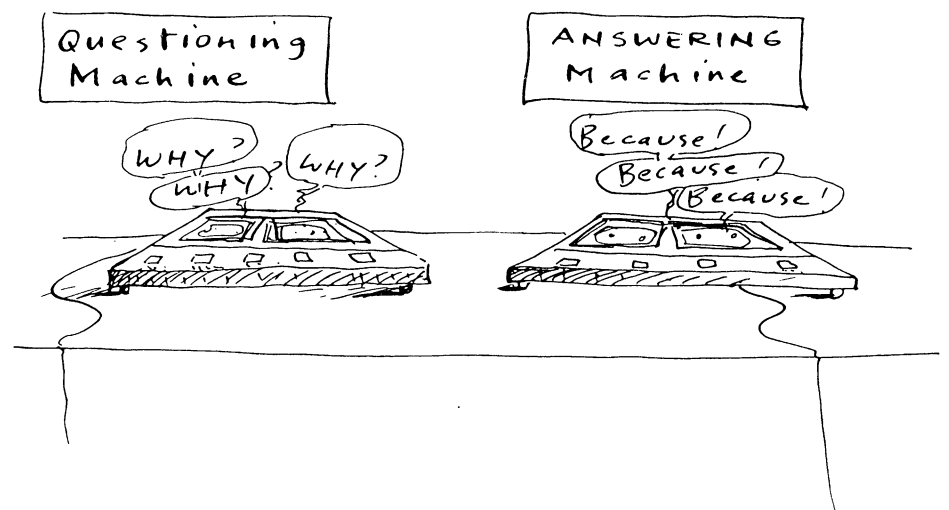
ephone live within cities and make primarily local or pastoral calls, where Telecom retains its monopoly; isolated country women who live on the 'thin' routes of no interest to competing carriers will not benefit, and may suffer increased charges as the carriers compete for the custom of city-dwelling STD users.

Distaff Associates recommend that any survey of subscribers related to costs, transfers to Optus or other carriers, should be validated by a survey of female spouses and differences should be regarded as possible indications of the invalidity of equating 'subscribers' with 'users'.

## Technological Issues

The consultants say that the overall results of their study suggest that there are major gaps in the Government's development of social policy aspects of

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telephone services. They refer to the split between the technology and the people factors, and say that 'the predominance of engineering technology aspects has tended to drive the development of the service, leaving much of the social function to marketing strategies rather than planning it as an integral part of the service'.

The researchers say that the split into 'gendered' activities creates problems in recognising the value of women in the workplace and their multiplicity of roles as workers, family pivot points, linchpins of societal structure, and emotional and physical supports of paid workers and dependents. The assumption inherent in this split, that activities in one sphere are of one kind and operate independently of the other sphere is simplistic, and is increasingly under question.

This artificial split spills over into the technology, where the emphasis in the use of items like mobile phones, faxes and modems has been on their application in business. Yet mobile phones, for example, could be used as a means of creating independence for both older and younger people in situations where women need to provide support and supervision, and can do this from a distance.

**"Telephones have become a community, the same as communities were when people congregated in the village or wherever. Telephones have become the same thing. You have your telephone network of friends and relatives, that in this day and age have become a very big component of our lives."**

Survey participant

## Creating Micro-communities

The researchers say that their work shows that the phone creates separate communities which can only exist because of the phone. These communities span different types of relation-

ships which would be hard to sustain through personal contact, as they require both time, resources and more complex inputs than participants are prepared to commit, but allow people to maintain contact, swap information, seek reassurance.

Such communities include people like dialysis users, mutual support groups such as nursing mothers, computer buffs and parents tracing their children's activities.

Similarly, phones allow for the maintenance of difficult relationships, with relatives for example, where privacy and distance dilute face-to-face tensions.

*The present emphasis on high volume customers, business and user-pays suggests that the original brief [for the telephone service] has been*

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## What the Study Showed

**Access and Contact:** The availability of phones and their free and not too expensive use allows people with substantial limits on their mobility and other health problems to maintain a high degree of independence. Time use is stretched, allowing for unpaid community and family work together with paid work. Clear patterns of distance care emerged, whereby management and overview as well as voice contact replace physical presence.

**Generational Differences:** There is a clear difference in attitudes to/use of the phone between older and younger women. For older women it is an asset and a necessity but still new and changing; younger women expect to have phones and answering machines as integral parts of their work and social lives. There is a 'misfit' between the need of people for the services they could use and their actual use of the phone. Older women worry about costs, rarely use technologies that could assist them, often have phones in inaccessible places and are not aware of useful extra attachments.

**Cost:** The rising costs of calls or installation are likely to affect negatively those who most need the phone: older women, sole parents on pensions, young couples with one partner isolated at home. Older women with carer responsibilities were worried about costs and were mostly using the phone less frequently than their optimum comfort level. They talked about waiting for off peak STD times and limiting their local calls in some cases. This was the only group that could actually quote costs of rentals and calls. Migrant women saw overseas calls as a very occasional luxury, though their views on both cost and complexity of making these calls may be outdated.

**Technology:** The study tended to confirm other research about alienation of women - particularly older women - from technology, with participants showing various levels of comfort and discomfort with touchphones and answering machines. The researchers say that the design and promotion of telephones has not assumed that these needed to be user friendly, and this is shortsighted. 'The recognition that women have been socially alienated by male ownership of technical skills would seem to suggest that a women-centred approach to promoting the attributes and possibilities might create a rare win-win situation, with supplier and user both making more effective use of the equipment'. □

Eva Cox and Helen Leonard, **Weaving Community Links: the cost benefits of telephones in maintaining the social fabric through the unpaid work of women**, Distaff Associates Sydney, June 1993, 76pp. Limited copies available free to community groups from (02) 557 1955, fax (02) 517 2400.



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*transformed into a money-making obligation with an ever more limited community service obligation. The loss of phone contact cannot easily be replaced by face-to-face contact in a spread out community. There would be increased road use, increased demand for full time carers, and increased frustration as carers and the cared for feel isolated and anxious.*

Weaving Community Links, p.44

## Economic and Policy Implications

The researchers conclude that with an ageing population, increased paid workforce participation, extended families and networks, there are serious policy issues related to telephones.

The present narrow definitions of community service obligations (CSOs) which relate subsidy to dependency on pension payments, could indirectly increase the burden on the public purse. There needs to be some recognition that needs for phone services may relate to life cycle, residence, health status, location of primary networks and a range of other indicators well outside the present considerations.

Distaff Associates say that the moving of CSOs to the general federal budget raises the possibility of allocating costs to the areas which benefit, like child care and aged services.

They have provided an economic model showing direct and indirect costs, for example income foregone or losses sustained because a certain action is not possible. The consultants emphasise that resources did not allow a sophisticated approach and the results are indicative only.

Nevertheless, it is clear that massive social and economic costs to the community and government could flow from diminished access to the phone on the part of women.

The model draws on a number of hypothetical situations where phone access would make a clear difference to outcome - such as an older woman living on her own in need of reminders that she is still loved and cared for; an isolated woman in a new estate; a bedridden woman of NESB. These cases are extrapolated out to a notional figure - and probably a very conservative one - that at any given time, 100,000 women in Australia might be affected by a similar situation. As an indication of the dimension of direct costs which might ensue, the study's estimates include: \$2.4m for loss of work time; \$36.4m for unemployment/sickness benefit and rental assistance; \$10.8m for respite care; \$1.5m for interpreters; \$90.9m for health care costs. □

### Volunteers Needed for New Project

The researchers make a number of recommendations for action in both the long and the short term, as well as further areas for research. Work in one of these areas is already under way, on workplace telephone use as a major factor and link in realising child care and other family responsibilities.

Distaff are keen to consult employers of ten or more women to seek their co-operation and involvement in this important research, and also women workers with dependents who would be willing to record their personal use of the phone in the workplace for a two week period.

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## New Media Inquiry

### The Senate inquiry into 'rights and obligations of the media' took many by surprise.

The Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee wants submissions by 3 September 1993.

Victorian Labor Senator, Barney Cooney, proposed the inquiry, which has been advertised in the press but largely ignored by the mainstream media, in its news and comment sections.

Cooney, a lawyer, has demonstrated a continuing interest in media issues and made one of the few questioning speeches by a Labor MP at the time of the media carve-up of 1986-87.

The Committee's terms of reference are like a smorgasbord of issues which periodically excite interest, for instance: media intrusions into grief; performance of the Press Council and AJA ethics committees; rights of access to media, in particular a right of reply; 'trial by media'; and cameras in the courtroom.

Particular reference is to be given to:

- (a) the right to privacy and the right to know;
- (b) the need for journalists to protect the identity of their sources of information;
- (c) the right of access to the media by members of the public;
- (d) courts and tribunals and the media;
- (e) journalistic ethics;
- (f) disciplinary processes for journalists;
- (g) any other matters relevant to the question of journalistic ethics and standards and the quality of reportage.

Paragraph (g) ensures that, if the media publicise the inquiry, the Committee will be a kind of 'complaints bureau' for any number of citizens critical of media. □

Paul Chadwick