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# Crossing Gender Boundaries: The Case of Technology Centers in Favelas.

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## Introduction

As an ICT4D scholar my aim is to provide an in-depth view of the role of ICTs in social change and the ways that social practices shape the adoption of ICTs, design, and the organization of their use. I am specifically interested in studying technology in less industrialized parts of the world to understand the effects of ICTs on the development and empowerment of marginalized communities. Methodologically, I use qualitative methods drawn from ethnography in online and offline contexts, and quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the web.

I have conducted research in Brazil, Cuba and India, and for this workshop, I will present a case of technology use by women in the favelas, urban slums, in Brazil, which would contribute to discussions, and foment potential collaborations among the workshop participants. This case was drawn from a fieldwork over eight months in the favelas of Vitória and focus on the motivations, engagements and adoption of ICTs by marginalized people in community technology centers (CTCs).

### **Case of Women in CTCs in favelas**

The infra- and social structures of the CTCs influenced who and how favela residents accessed these centers, leading to the norm: "*LAN houses are for boys and Telecenters are for girls*". The LAN houses in the favelas were considered reference centers for games, either on computers or consoles. Among the informants, no one had a video game console at home, and they went to the LAN houses to play their favorite games, which were FIFA, Counter Strike and Call of Duty. The ambience at LAN houses was dark, walls were decorated with posters with pictures of half-nude Lara Croft and war scenes from Call of Duty, and boys cursed at each other and shouted constantly. The presence of female teenagers in LAN houses was not appreciated by their parents – "*my dad doesn't want me to talk to boys because he doesn't want me to end up with a belly [pregnant]*" (Alice, 15 years old) – and the frequent male teenager customers:

*"Video games are not for girls, they don't know how play it. Can you imagine a girl plying CS [Counter Strike]? They can barely kill a fly; imagine having the guts to shoot at someone in the game. They should play with their dolls or polish each other's nails."* (Marco, years old).

Girls in the favelas faced the social pressure to stay away from LAN houses, however, they still mentioned their interest in playing video games.

*"Yeah, the games are violent, but even the guys will say that, that is the main reason why they like such games, but I don't have a problem with it, it is all for fun, you know? It's just to relax... I'd love to play games but the boys seem to have a problem with girls*

*playing with them... maybe they don't want to lose to us [girls] [laughing]."* (Amanda, 18 years old).

Just like Amanda, the 13 female teenagers, out of 16, I interacted with, demonstrated interest in playing video games, whether they were considered violent or not, but they were discouraged due to the LAN houses' ambience and social norms imposed by their parents and boys in the centers:

*"I'm always scared to go to Ghetto [LAN house]. It is dark; the boys are pushing each other... screaming... I don't know... I don't get a good vibe from that place. That is why I prefer the Casa Brasil [Telecenter in Itararé]."* (Thais)

Telecenters did not provide the same game experience as LAN houses. The computers ran on Ubuntu and the users could not install and play their favorite games. Such limitation affected girls the most because they were not "allowed" in LAN houses and could not play games like FIFA. Their access to games was narrowed to web/flash-based and Facebook games, such as Candy Crush and Farmville: "*my gaming experiences revolves around whatever I can find on Facebook, like Candy Crush.*" (Amanda). These findings follow Lemmens et al. (2006) who argue that boys are more attracted to violent video games than girls, and Oreglia (2014) who claims that girls play Facebook games, like Farmville, more often than other games. However, as I showed in this short paper, the choices of female teenagers did not reflect on their game preferences, instead, it was a result of their limitations and social constraints they faced.

Telecenters had a complete different ambiance than LAN houses. The lights were bright, the Inclusion Managers tried to keep the conversations at a low tone and the walls were decorated with workshop announcements, job openings, beautiful landscapes, and motivational and biblical messages.

In both Telecenters, I observed a larger presence of women than men, which followed the numbers – from the centers’ database – mentioned by the Telecenters’ manager. According to her, in Itararé and São Benedito the ratio was 3:2. The women felt welcomed and comfortable in the CTCs, not only because of the ambiance but also because of the social interactions in there:

*"I don't like LAN houses because it is too heavy for me, you know... it is just not for me. I only go there if I have to get online on the weekends. I don't think they are bad, but they are just not for me. Here in the Telecenter [Itararé] I can make new friends, like Zilda the cleaning lady. Now we go to church together. I feel free, I can talk to people, ask for help to the Inclusion Agent, she is so friendly and welcoming. Sometimes I just want to come to see her."* (Neuza, 40 years old).

Although women felt safe in the Telecenters, these centers did not help them addressing larger issues in the favelas such as sexism, sexual harassment and women’s rights. Telecenters should promote engendered policies in order to mobilize women because in order to affect change, women must cooperate, unify, and synthesize their cultural actions to redefine the parameters of oppressive social structures (Freire, 2000): *"ICTs coupled with the forces of "grassroots globalization," could give women louder*

*voices, greater opportunities, and enhanced ability to design their own futures. Moreover, by leveraging ICTs to mobilize women's groups, ICTs can help women combat environments of oppression and marginalization"* (Johnson, 2003, p. 9).

This short paper recognizes how gendered social norms related to the usage of CTCs’ spaces represent an important framing dimension to access ICTs. While LAN houses in the favelas were coded as male, the Telecenters were coded as female. This shows that technology is situated in framing institutions (Wajcman, 2004) and such framing can be heavily gendered (Kleine, 2011). Gender-aware studies are a powerful tool in understanding patterns of ICT adoption. As Hafkin and Jorge (2002) have claimed, there is an urgent need for improved gender analysis in technology-driven development. Only by paying closer attention to the gender dimension can [CTCs] be effectively leveraged to tap into the full potential of marginalized and oppressed communities.

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