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**Commission on the Status of Women****Forty-seventh session**

3-14 March 2003

Agenda item 3 (c) (i)

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives****Panel discussion on participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women****Summary submitted by the moderator**

1. At its second meeting, on 3 March 2003, the Commission on the Status of Women held a panel discussion followed by a dialogue on participation in and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women, one of the thematic issues of the Commission's forty-seventh session. The panellists were Carolina Aguilar Ayerra (Cuba), Editorial Director of “Women of Cuba”; Ammu Joseph (India), freelance journalist and media analyst; Rosalind Gill (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), lecturer at the London School of Economics; Concepción García Ramilo (Philippines), project manager for the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme; and Sarbuland Khan, Director, Division for Economic and Social Council Support and Coordination, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The panel was moderated by Birgit Stevens (Belgium).

2. Participants noted that the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and the profound changes in global media and communication systems posed opportunities and challenges for the promotion of gender equality. They emphasized the role of ICT and the media as tools for development and as central to the empowerment of women. These new media and ICT were increasingly used to share knowledge, enhance participation of all members of society, increase

networking, give voice to marginalized groups, organize political action, empower people, fight poverty and enhance economic development. It was therefore particularly important to address gender-based discrimination and inequalities that undermined women's access to opportunities in the emerging knowledge and information society and also diminished the potential of ICT and the media to be an effective tool for the promotion of gender equality.

3. A human rights approach framed the debate as participants placed emphasis on women's rights in the information society, with enhanced opportunities for democratic governance, the exercise of citizenship and full participation in development for all, based on rights to information and communication. Participants also made reference to the call in the United Nations Millennium Declaration (see General Assembly resolution 55/2) that ICT become available to all. As these technologies were seen as tools for the achievement of all the millennium development goals, their gender perspectives had to be addressed in their use.

4. Participants underlined that consideration of the role of media and ICT in the empowerment of women presented the Commission on the Status of Women with a crucial opportunity for enhancing attention to gender perspectives in the ongoing preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society and for ensuring that gender equality was at the centre of global discussions on the future of the information society. While the draft declaration that had emanated from the second session of the preparatory committee of the Summit (17 and 18 February 2003) paid some attention to gender perspectives and the priorities and needs of women, participants were very concerned about the absence of relevant actions from the draft plan of action. It would therefore be especially important for participants in the Commission, particularly for representatives from national machineries for the advancement of women, to work with their national delegations to the Summit to strengthen attention to gender perspectives in the process and in the outcome documents. The Commission's agreed conclusions, as well as relevant reports before the Commission, would be important instruments in ensuring the success of those efforts. Steps were also needed to increase the number of women, as well as of gender experts, in governmental, business and civil society delegations in all activities related to the Summit and its preparations.

5. Women's portrayal in the media remained an urgent challenge that had to be addressed across all regions and all types of media. It was noted that an increase in the number of women in media professions had not necessarily led to a less sexist or stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. New strategies were needed to increase awareness among all media professionals to change the images of women conveyed by the media, as well as to improve media content. This was especially necessary as sexist images and rhetoric had resurfaced in new media and in ICT. An increasing sexualization and normalization of pornography was now pervasive in all media, and the Internet was increasingly used to spread pornography and for trafficking of women and girls. Participants called for policies and adequate regulatory frameworks to address gender-based discrimination and, in particular, sexism in all media, as had already been proposed in the Beijing Platform for Action. At the same time, it was recognized that in any legislative and regulatory approach, a balance had to be found between women's rights and freedom of expression of the media and in ICT. Approaches used in other areas, such as the regulation of hate speech and licensing procedures, were mentioned as examples

that could give guidance in this regard. The lack of or insufficient attention to gender perspectives in media and communication policies also had to be addressed.

6. While the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society and other global and United Nations activities on ICT had highlighted the digital divide between and within countries and between rich and poor, urban and rural dwellers, young and old, and divides based on class, caste or ethnicity, little attention had so far been paid to the gender-based barriers and divides women encountered in access to and use of information and communication technologies. While most of the world's people remained without access to ICT, existing gender inequalities had made it even more difficult for women to gain such access. Participants identified the gender dimensions of a number of barriers, including those relating to the lack or inadequacy of infrastructure, costs, poverty and resources, literacy and educational levels and language.

7. In addition to access, participants emphasized the need to clarify women's information needs and to address questions of content available through the media and new technologies. Participants noted that information and communication technologies were tools that had to be integrated into women's lives rather than being pursued for their own sake. They should be adapted to women's needs and made part of all programmes, for example those aimed at enhancing women's education or health. Much of the information presently available through ICT was in English, and thus of limited relevance and use to the majority of women. This made it imperative to support the production of local content in local languages. Organizations that produced such local content aimed at the empowerment of women especially deserved assistance. Participants also called for research on women's information needs.

8. Many participants emphasized the importance and continuing usefulness of "old", traditional media and technologies, especially those that were not text-based, as tools for the empowerment of women. Women's initiatives in the area of community, traditional and alternative media should be recognized, supported and strengthened. Community radio was cited as an example and as a vital link for disseminating local information to communities not sufficiently served by other national media. Radio in particular was a means for poor women, especially in rural areas, to obtain information and to increase knowledge, and was considered by some to be a more useful tool than other technologies, especially in the short term.

9. Participants were concerned that little progress had been made in improving the trend of women's employment in the media, especially at the decision-making level. Issues such as high attrition rates of women in media professions worldwide required a range of measures, including the setting of goals and targets and the adoption of gender-sensitive policies in human resources management. The information society offered many new economic opportunities for women, but women had to overcome numerous barriers to take advantage of them. Unfavourable established patterns of women's employment were already being replicated in the field of ICT, where women were increasingly found in low-paying jobs. Participants called for measures to promote women's economic participation in the information society. Greater numbers of women and girls in science and technology were a critical prerequisite for ensuring that women not only acquired access to ICT, but also gained more control over such technologies and their production.

10. The changing environment in the global media and communication systems and the rapid developments in the ICT sector increased the urgency to integrate gender perspectives into legislation, policies and regulatory frameworks related to those sectors. So far, most national ICT policies, plans and programmes paid no attention to gender perspectives and were silent on women's priorities and needs. Gender analysis had to be undertaken at all stages of policy and programme development, from their initial design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Political will and leadership had been decisive in a number of countries to strengthen attention to gender perspectives in national ICT policies. An increase in financial resources was needed to improve infrastructure and increase women's access to ICT.

11. Participants called for the collection of data disaggregated by sex on the use of and access to ICT and the media in order to create a solid basis for informed policy-making. Apart from quantitative data, qualitative gender-specific indicators on various aspects of ICT use, access and dissemination, as well as on women's information needs, had to be compiled so that targeted responses could be developed. The establishment of measurable targets and benchmarks for gender equality in ICT was also recommended.

12. The work of the Economic and Social Council had been instrumental in putting ICT for development on the agenda of the United Nations. This work was of an inclusive and participatory nature that involved the contribution of all stakeholder groups. The United Nations ICT Task Force was based on a multi-stakeholder approach that involved Governments, the private sector and civil society and that included gender equality as one of its goals. A number of the most interesting and promising activities spearheaded by the working groups of the Task Force were women's projects.

13. Participants provided examples of good practices and shared ideas for enhancing the role of the media and ICT in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Awards for positive, non-sexist portrayals of women in the media were seen as an excellent incentive, but measures were also needed to ensure institutional adherence to non-sexist portrayals within media organizations. Incentive systems of different types could be pursued, and voluntary codes of conduct and guidelines on gender-sensitive and non-sexist reporting should be encouraged. Efforts were necessary to achieve adequate coverage in the media and ICT of women in political and leadership positions, especially also during election campaigns, as inadequate coverage of women by the media had been shown to be directly related to their underrepresentation in political office. Partnerships between government and civil society organizations helped in increasing women's access to ICT.

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