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**PANEL I**

**Participation 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**

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[English only]

# Gender Perspectives in ICT

**Key outcomes and recommendations from the expert group meeting on
"Information and communication technologies and their impact on and use
as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women"
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The impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) to social, political and economic changes has arguably become the major development concern for many governments. In the last few years development in many countries have mostly focused on pursuing economic strategies and policies that seek to promote a more attractive environment for the ICT industry including the deregulation of the telecommunications industry, attracting foreign investments, and increasing Internet connectivity.

However, despite advances in the ICT industry, the benefits of ICT have not reached majority of people, especially in developing countries. The uneven diffusion of telecommunications and Internet technology is skewed largely in favor of urban, higher income and educated people. Access for people in the developing world continues to be marginal because of the high cost of connectivity resulting in their exclusion from the emerging global system being built around information and knowledge.

Women are particularly marginalized since the great majority has no buying power and no access to modern means of communication. Access to ICT is typically divided along traditional lines of development resulting in unequal access that has become known as the 'digital divide' or 'digital exclusion'. This divide is often characterized by high levels of access to technologies including the Internet while infrastructure in less developed nations is at a very low level due to problems of poverty, lack of resources, illiteracy and low levels of education. That women are in the deepest end of the digital divide has been the main message of gender advocates working in the field of ICT. [1]

As the UN Human Development Report 2001 points out, "technology is created in response to market pressures —not the needs of poor people, who have little purchasing power". In this climate, governments are starting to look urgently and closely into the relationship between information and communication technologies, and development. The UN Human Development report correctly asserts that it is a pre-requisite for governments to first recognize that technology policy affects a host of development issues, including public health, education and job creation. The report also calls on governments to develop national strategies that harness the human creativity and technological capacity of their citizens and pay particular attention to the creation of diffusion of technologies towards poverty eradication.

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[1] Association for Progressive Communications, Internet and ICT for Social Change.
http://www.apcwomen.org/gem/icts.htm.

Equally critical is the mobilization of resources to effectively use ICT in the provision of government social services to its citizenry.[2]

**ICT for development**

ICT provides unique opportunities for economic growth and human development. It can shape and enhance a wide range of development applications — from electronic commerce to access to financial markets; from generating employment to providing opportunities for investment to entrepreneurs, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises; from improved agricultural and manufacturing productivity to the empowerment of all sections of society; from long-distance education to telemedicine, from environmental management and monitoring to prevention and management of disasters.

However, the promise of vast new opportunities for economic growth and social development poses serious challenges and risks. While bringing important economic and social benefits, ICT can at the same time further widen disparities between and within countries. In considering the impact of ICT on the creation of a global knowledge-based economy, it is worth noting that the majority of the world's population still lives in poverty and remains untouched by the ICT revolution. The emerging new economy, characterized by a rapidly increasing reliance on value creation through information and knowledge, remains heavily concentrated in the developed countries. Unless access to and use of ICT is broadened, the majority of people, particularly those living in developing countries, will not enjoy the benefits of the information revolution that is transforming the way that production is organized and information is shared around the world.

**Communication Rights**

With the convergence of ICT and the emergence of the 'information' or 'knowledge' society, development strategists also see the need for developing countries to adapt ICT as a potential force not only for creating new economic growth opportunities but also for enhancing political participation of citizens and strengthening of democratic processes.

People worldwide are forging a new vision of the information society with human rights at its core. New forms of media and networking tools are being used to build global communities from the local level, to share knowledge, amplify marginalized voices, organize political action, empower participation, and sustain and celebrate cultural and intellectual diversity.

A rights-based approach to ICT policy development is premised on the recognition of the Right to Communicate as a universal human right. With the emergence of the information society, the exercise of citizenship and the full and equal participation in the current economic development is the basis for the assertion of this right to information and communication.

The information society should be grounded on the Right to Communicate as a means to enhance human rights and to strengthen the social, economic and cultural lives of people and communities. Crucial to this is building an information society based on principles of transparency, diversity, participation and social and economic

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[2] Human Development Report 2001:Making New Technologies Work for Human Development, UNDP, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2001.

justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives. [3] However, this democratizing aspect of ICT has recently been threatened by new legislation against terrorism that raises legitimate concerns from civil society about their impact in restricting civil liberties and human rights.

**Advocacy for gender equality in information society**

Advocacy for gender issues in ICT first gained a foothold during the Fourth World Conference on Women. Women's organizations successfully lobbied for the recognition of the need for women to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of new technologies in order to participate fully in their growth and impact. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PfA), adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, drew attention to the emerging global communications network and its impact on public policies, and private attitudes and behaviour. It called for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. The twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, held in June 2000 to review progress made in implementation of the Platform for Action, recognized the increased opportunities created by information and communication technologies (ICT) for women to contribute to knowledge sharing, networking and electronic commerce activities. It also noted that poverty, lack of access and opportunities, illiteracy, including computer illiteracy, and language barriers prevented some women from using ICT, including the Internet. Steps were proposed to ensure that women benefited fully from ICT, including equal access to ICT-related education, training and entrepreneurship opportunities, and equal access as producers and consumers of ICT through public and private partnerships.

As pointed out in the five-year review report of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, traditionally, gender differences and disparities have been ignored in policies and programs dealing with the development and dissemination of improved technologies. As a result, women have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances. Women, therefore, need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies. Otherwise, the information revolution might bypass women or produce adverse effects on their lives. The outcome of the five-year review recommended that further actions and initiatives have to be explored and implemented to avoid new forms of exclusion and ensure that women and girls have equal access and opportunities in respect of the developments of science and technology.

**Key Outcomes and Recommendations of the UN DAW Expert Group Meeting**

More recently, the role of ICT as a tool for development has attracted the sustained attention of the United Nations. In 2000, the Economic and Social Council adopted a Ministerial Communiqué on the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy. Later that year, the Millennium Declaration underscored the urgency of ensuring that the benefits of new technologies, especially ICT, be available to all. A World Summit on the Information Society, with the ITU as lead organizing entity, will take place in 2003 (Geneva) and 2005 (Tunisia).
For the first time, the Commission on the Status of Women will consider the question of ICT and the empowerment of women in-depth as part of its multi-year program of work for 2002-2006. In preparation for this, the Division for the Advancement of Women, in cooperation with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations ICT Task Force Secretariat, organized an expert

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[3] CRIS: The Communications Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign, http://www.apc.org/english/rights/action/campaign_cris.shtml

group meeting (EGM) on "Information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women". The experts adopted recommendations covering these aspects, addressed to Governments and other actors at national and international level.

The EGM report presents a body of evidence outlining how the intersection of gendered social relationships, gender discrimination, and gender-blind ICT policy processes, those that do not specifically take into account different effects on women and men, **undermine women's access to opportunities in the emerging knowledge and information society and also diminish the potential of ICT to be an effective tool for the promotion of gender equality**. The report identifies specific challenges, which are usually invisible, such as women's uneven and unaffordable access to ICT facilities and services; inadequate provision of relevant content and applications, particularly in local languages and adapted to the needs of non-literate women; effects of lack of gender awareness on the part of ICT decision makers, particularly in terms of allocation of budgets for ICT projects; and relatively poor performance of the ICT sector, in comparison with sectors such as environment, water and sanitation, small- and medium-enterprise development, health and education, in using specific policy or regulatory mechanisms to promote gender equality. The report and related studies also identify the negative effects of persistent gender discrimination in labour markets, in education and training opportunities, and allocation of financial resources for entrepreneurship and business development on women's opportunities in ICT. The evidence analyzed also shows that women are underrepresented in all aspects of decision-making in operations, policy and regulation, which has slowed the pace at which attention to gender perspectives is being realized. Although the majority of the world's women face these serious threats, policy in this arena continues to treat gender issues as being non existent or unimportant.

At the same time, the report presents **coherent and strategic responses to the challenges that face women in the ICT area.** These focus on mainstreaming gender equality in ICT policy, including through legislation and other measures; facilitating participation by a wide range of stakeholders, in particular gender advocates and women, in ICT policy processes; and mobilizing resources for ICT projects and programmes that further the interests of girls and women. The report also notes the need to increase access to educational and training opportunities for girls and women and to expand women's participation as employees, business managers and entrepreneurs in the ICT sector. Improving women's access to health care and education services through expanded use of ICT channels, and strengthening women's use of ICT for political participation, advocacy and networking as well as the need to respond to the specific risks posed by ICT-mediated gender-based violence, including Internet-based trafficking in women were also prioritised.

**The EGM put forward the following main recommendations:**

*Creating an enabling environment for gender equality in ICT*

Making ICT policy gender-sensitive is an area of great importance in securing the benefits of the information age for girls and women.  Gender concerns and objectives need to be articulated in ICT policy; otherwise it is unlikely that girls and women will reap the benefits of the information society. Recent evaluations of ICT projects show that there is no such thing as a gender- neutral ICT policy. At the same time, most national ICT policies are generally silent on gender issues and do not address gender equality goals. Unless governments and decision-makers pay explicit attention to gender in ICT policy, gender issues will not be considered in implementation.

To create an enabling environment, ICT policy processes must integrate gender analysis at all stages of their development, from the initial design to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.  This requires an analysis of the current status of women and men's participation in and use of ICT, including a comprehensive analysis of sex disaggregated statistics and indicators and policy responses that target gender-based differences and inequalities .  In addition, the policy process itself needs to be inclusive and consultative through the participation of stakeholders groups representative of the full spectrum of society, including gender advocates .

### *Promoting women's economic participation in the information society*

ICT offers new economic opportunities for women particularly in employment and entrepreneurship. However, in order to take advantage of them many women have to overcome significant obstacles such as women's high rates of illiteracy, the lack of ICT training and the dominance of English in software and in content that prevent them from entering the information economy.

Even where women have the necessary skills, persistent cultural constraints, such as stereotypical views of the roles of men and women and women's lack of mobility, remain a barrier to their full participation in the information age. Boundaries of work-time in the technological society do not recognize men and women's multiple roles, and labour laws may prevent women's full participation in the information economy.  Inequitable global terms of trade have resulted in low wages and poor working conditions for many women working in offshore ICT manufacturing. The high risk of unemployment in the ICT sector, frequently combined with unfavourable labour contracts, produces hardship for women working as ICT professionals. In addition, the poor distribution of telecommunications infrastructure, high costs of technology and access also present barriers to many women in developing countries using the technology for economic advancement.

To ensure that women economically benefit in the information society, there is a need for governments as well as other actors such as the private sector and labor organizations to increase women's access to ICT literacy and ensure that women are not disproportionately disadvantaged within the global ICT industry; develop ICT-based economic opportunities for women, especially rural women, such as telecenters and business incubators, and support the scaling up and sustainability of successful pilot projects and; develop ICT-based information systems with relevant content for women to increase their economic opportunities and entrepreneurship skills, including information about national economic and trade policies and programs.

Universal access policies and strategies must address the differential needs of women and men. ICT must be made available to all at an affordable cost and the development of infrastructure must ensure that marginalized groups are not further disadvantaged.

Given the low level of access to ICT, especially to computers and the Internet in

many countries in the region, there is a need to expand public access beyond educated and urban-based citizens who are the most likely to have access to computers and the internet. Interface with other more accessible ICT such as mobile phones, public communication kiosks and mass media have to be taken into consideration by governments in its universal access strategies.

***Promoting social empowerment through the use of ICT***

Although women are acceding in ever-greater numbers to jobs and expertise with ICT, the same is not necessarily true of their access to decision-making and control of the resources. Women are under-represented in all ICT decision-making structures including policy and regulatory institutions, ministries responsible for ICT, boards and senior management of private ICT companies. Representation is important in creating the conditions and regulations that will enable women to maximize their possibilities of benefiting from ICT, and ensuring the accountability of the institutions that are responsible for developing ICT policies.

E-governance policies offer opportunities for the transformation of governance processes that could be key to women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equality. It can also be a key approach to enhancing women's full and equal participation in public life, particularly for women living in rural or remote areas, or that are otherwise marginalized.

Throughout the world some interventions stand out which demonstrate the potential of ICT to break down unequal gender relations and to advance the particular interests of women and girls. In identifying priorities, attention has to be paid to context-specific and locally appropriate and gender sensitive issues, and the close interconnection of issues such as race, class, caste, geographic location and age with gender to produce complex structures of inequality and difference. Among the priorities identified were the need for comprehensive educational ICT programs such as ICT literacy and e-learning; the use of ICT in enhancing women's access to information on all health-related issues especially in HIV and AIDS and building the capacity of women, girls and women's groups to use ICT to support networking activities for empowerment. One of the most important democratizing aspects of the Internet has been the creation of private online spaces including secure online spaces for women, protecting them from harassment and enabling them to enjoy freedom of expression and privacy of communication. Utilizing this aspect of the Internet for the development of democracy, particularly in opposing gender discrimination, contributes to overcoming oppression and exploitation.

**World Summit on the Information Society**

The convening of a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) by the United Nations system is a unique opportunity to focus global attention on the building of an information society that is based on goals of social, political and economic justice, sustainable human development, support for democracy, participation, and empowerment and gender equality. Equal partnership of governments, United Nation Agencies, private sector and civil society can make a meaningful contribution to achieving this goal.

To this end, gender advocates have lobbied consistently throughout the WSIS process, at regional and international levels, to ensure that gender equality and women's rights are integrated into the WSIS and its follow up programs.[4] Gender and ICT advocates were successful in incorporating concerns with respect the

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[4] APCWNSP has mapped a Gender and Advocacy Chart of all gender related initiatives in the WSIS process, http://www.genderit.org/wsis/wsis_process.shtml

importance of women's involvement in decision making in all aspects of the information society at the Pan-European WSIS regional meeting. Outcomes of the Gender Roundtable formed part of the official Conference Report, and were included in the Conference Political Declaration:

"*Governments and other stakeholders should provide the necessary conditions to ensure women's equal access to information and knowledge as well as ensuring their equal role as producers and decision makers in all aspects related to the shaping of IT policies and frameworks*"[5]

At the Asia-Pacific WSIS meeting held Tokyo, the Gender Forum statement pointed out that the developments that shape the information society should pursue goals of gender equality and women's advancement, as well as social, political and economic justice, sustainable human development, and support for cultural and linguistic diversity.[6] The Tokyo Declaration included a paragraph on gender:

"*Gender issues: Unequal power relations and other social and cultural aspects have contributed to differential access, participation and status for men and women in the region. In this regard, more attention should be given to overcoming these constraints and ensuring that women can equally benefit from the increased use of ICTs for empowerment and full participation in shaping political, economic and social development.*"[7]

A Gender Caucus statement outlining the concerns for the Africa region was also issued at the Bamako WSIS meeting. However, in spite of these efforts at the regional level, almost none of these recommendations are reflected in the global inter-governmental process. The current 'non-paper' *[Information and Communication for All - submitted by the President of the WSIS Preparatory Committee]*[8] which aims to orient discussions for the development of the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan is gender blind, and refers only twice to women's needs, in the context of very specific activities.

Part of the problem is the uneven participation of women in the WSIS process. At the Asia-Pacific Meeting for example, less than 20% of the panelists in the six panel sessions were women; out of 11 moderators, chairs and rapporteurs of the six panels, only 3 were women (27%). But more daunting and alarming than these numbers was the fact that there was hardly any mention of gender or women in any of the panel sessions.[9] Although these observations are in relation to the Asian Regional Meeting, it is fair to estimate, based on observations of women throughout the process, that similar statistics would be true of most events of the WSIS process. The unequal participation of women as well representatives of civil society has seriously undermined the official intent to make the WSIS a genuinely multi-stakeholder undertaking.

In addition, the increasing pre-dominance of a corporate agenda (particularly strong emphasis on 'private-public' partnerships) and the increasing prominence of the Information Security Agenda poses a grave risk that the Summit will not succeed in it's aim of creating a vision of the information society that contributes to

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[5] . (www.itu.int/wsis/events/bucharest.html)

[6] WSIS Update: Report From The Gender Forum At The WSIS Asia/Pacific Regional Meeting In Japan, Jan 17, Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Isis International-Manila, http://www.genderit.org/wsis/globalnets/218.shtml

[7] http://www.wsis-japan.jp/documents/tokyo_declaration.html

[8] http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsispc2/inf/S03-WSISPC2-INF-0001!!MSW-E.doc

[9] http://www.genderit.org/wsis/globalnets/217.shtml

human development and gender equality and has human rights values at it's core, unlike the BPFA and the Millennium Development Goals.

Given this situation, urgent action by all stakeholders is needed to ensure that gender equality and women's rights are fully integrated in the official agreements of the WSIS.  This UN CSW meeting can be instrumental in developing a comprehensive agenda that will truly address gender equality within the information society. Support of governments is also needed for multi-stakeholder dialogues on a series of priority issues and themes between now and the Summits in Geneva and Tunis particularly to map out gender equality in national plans, policies and programmes and in supporting greater participation of women's organizations in national delegations.