Fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Parallel event on

ICT is the Key: Global Development, Empowerment and Gender Equality, the Elimination of Discrimination and Violence against the Girl Child

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Distinguished delegates,
Representatives of the private sector, civil society and the UN system,
Colleagues and friends,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this conference which is being held as a parallel event to the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and provide some introductory remarks on the context of the Commission.

The Commission was established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council 61 years ago as the principal inter-governmental body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the empowerment of women worldwide. The Commission meets once a year here at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to evaluate progress, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies on gender equality and empowerment of women and follow-up on their implementation at national level.

In its work, the Commission has given particular attention to the issue of women and information and communication technology (ICT), reflecting the increasing interest by the United Nations in ensuring that ICT becomes a meaningful instrument to empower women and girls throughout the world. In 2003, the Commission adopted recommendations on the access of women to the media and information and communication technologies and the use of media and ICT as an instrument for the empowerment of women..

The attention given by the Commission to women and ICT stems from the realization that, although the potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, social development and political participation had long been recognized, a serious "gender divide" existed which had not been given sufficient attention. This was reflected in the lower number of women and girls accessing and using ICT as compared to men and boys. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men and girls and boys and may even create new forms of inequality. If, however, on the other hand, the gender

dimensions of ICT - in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, education, and employment - are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a very powerful catalyst for the empowerment of women and girls and for the promotion of gender equality.

At its current session, the Commission is considering "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child" as its priority theme. As noted in the Secretary-General's report submitted to the Commission, despite the existence of an international legal framework and internationally agreed policies aimed at promoting the empowerment of girls, girls in all parts of the world continue to face discrimination and many forms of violence.

Girls continue to be married at a very young age in many countries and have to cut short their education and face the dangers of repeated pregnancies and childbirth which jeopardize their health and well-being. Millions of school-age girls world wide are working in domestic service which can expose them to significant levels of discrimination and violence and constrain their access to education and other opportunities. As many as 55 million girls world wide continue to be left out of formal schooling. The Millennium Development Goal 3 target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 has already been missed. Even where increased enrolment of girls has been achieved, positive outcomes are not guaranteed, as girls are more likely than boys to repeat classes or to drop out of school. Evidence also shows that girls are less motivated to pursue studies in science and technology and have lower achievement levels in these areas than boys, owing to low expectations and stereotypical attitudes.

Another issue of concern is that information and communication technology is generating new forms of violence such as Internet or mobile telephone stalking. Various forms of technologies are used to sexually exploit girls, such as digital video disks that enable greater interactivity between users and images, websites used for distribution and marketing of pornographic material, chat rooms used as spaces for child sexual abuse, and live video chats which can facilitate human trafficking for sexual purposes. There is a need to further study how ICT is used to perpetuate violence against girls and ensure that effective protection measures are put in place to prevent and combat such violence.

The empowerment of girls is key to breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and protecting and promoting their human rights. Empowerment entails a process whereby girls gain more control over their lives, become active members of their communities and are able to make informed choices about issues that directly affect them. Supporting the empowerment of girls entails the elimination of all barriers that prevent them from developing their full potential, including through the provision of equal access to, and full participation in, education and training, health services, community activities, and girl-friendly spaces for interaction with their peers. ICT can be effectively used as an instrument for empowerment, by providing unique opportunities for improving girls' access to information on health, nutrition, education,

and other human development opportunities, and by creating new opportunities for social interaction, including peer and bottom-up communication.

Many initiatives have been taken to increase girls' access to ICT and use ICT as an instrument for girls' empowerment in both developed and developing countries. Many countries apply a combination of traditional and new ICT, adapting, for example, the use of computers and the Internet, radio and television, in formal and informal learning, distance education and in establishing e-learning centres to support the education and training of girls. Many initiatives have been taken in all regions to increase access of girls to ICT and to use ICT as an instrument for girls' empowerment. For instance, Norway set up a campaign with a focus on introducing girls to ICT, and Iceland developed a national plan which encouraged an increase the number of girls studying computer science. Japan made information-related subjects compulsory in elementary and junior high schools. Bahrain launched a project to expand the use of ICT in education and provide ICT training to both boys and girls students. In a programme in the United States, professional women mentored girls between the ages of 13 and 18 in science, engineering and technology through a listserv and website in 10 regional offices.

New information and communication technologies are being used to raise awareness, disseminate information widely and share good practices on combating forms of violence against women and girls, for example with regard to female genital mutilation/cutting. ICT is also being used effectively in the global efforts to end trafficking of women and girls, for example, anti-trafficking activists have set up websites to warn women and girls about sexual slavery.

Many organizations are working to build the capacity of women to access and use new ICT. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, for example, implemented a project which awards scholarships to young African women for training in Internet networking. Participants benefited in terms of increased self-confidence and self-esteem. 82 per cent of graduates of the first course had concrete plans for use of the skills learned, including in entrepreneurship.

Despite many successful initiatives, gaps remain with regard to girls' access and use of ICT. Fewer girls than boys access and use information and communication technology and girls continue to be underrepresented in ICT courses, computer clubs and ICT-based careers. The trend for differentiation in use of ICT between boys and girls starts early. One study, for example, revealed that in the United States boys are five times more likely than girls to use home computers and parents spend twice as much on ICT products for their sons as they do for their daughters.

Challenges that constrain girls' access to ICT include high illiteracy rates, low educational levels among girls, and lack of skills training. Girls' access to ICT may also be limited by the fact that the location and logistics of public ICT facilities, such as telecentres, information centres and cybercafés, are often decided without considering the constraints for women and girls, such as inappropriate opening times (including

evenings), security issues and lack of transport. As a result, public ICT facilities have a tendency to become men-only spaces; effectively inhibiting women's and girls' access.

In many parts of the world, there is continuing discrimination in schools relation to access to ICT and opportunities to use ICT effectively. A 2001 study conducted by World Links in four African states – Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal and Uganda – reveals the persistence of gender inequalities in access to ICT. For example, in some schools in Ghana and Uganda, girls do not enjoy equitable access to the computer labs. High student-to-computer ratios and first-come, first-served policies do not favour girls who are typically heavily outnumbered by boys at the secondary level. Girls have earlier curfew hours and domestic responsibilities that limit their access time. The study proposes measures to correct this gender bias including by encouraging schools to develop "fair use" policies in computer labs, conducting gender-sensitivity sessions and advocating for reducing after-school duties of girls to give them more time.

It is clear that the potential of ICT to empower girls and foster equality between boys and girls has not been entirely harnessed. There is a need for greater understanding of the gender dimensions of access to and use of ICT, and of the importance of using ICT as a tool for the promotion of equality between boys and girls. Universal access policies, clear strategies for targeting girls, and adequate allocation of resources, including for training, are critical for ensuring that girls can be empowered through ICT.

Many of the participants who are attending this session of the Commission are representatives of Governments, entities of the United Nations system, and civil society, including the private sector and NGOs. Many, including those attending this AIT conference today, are working on the issues of ICT and girls' empowerment in different regions of the world. In the first two days of the Commission we have heard many Member States raise the potential of ICT and provide some good practice examples; others have raised the constraints they face in utilizing ICT effectively. This event therefore provides a unique opportunity to share good practices and lessons learned on the use of ICT to support the goal of the Commission on the Status of Women this year-the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child.

I hope the discussions in this conference will be interesting and that they will lead to the formulation of ideas on possible partnerships and future activities aimed at empowering girls through ICT. I wish you a very successful meeting.

Thank you.