

Expert Group Meeting

Information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women

Aide Mémoire

I. Introduction

The Division for the Advancement of Women, in cooperation with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the United Nations ICT Task Force Secretariat, is organizing an expert 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 meeting will take place in the Republic of Korea from 11 to 14 November 2002.

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.

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. In 2001, the Council considered the role of ICT for development in the context of partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector. In June 2002, the General Assembly will hold a two-day meeting devoted to ICT for development (17 and 18 June). A World Summit on the Information Society, with the ITU as lead organizing entity, will take place in 2003 (Geneva) and 2005 (Tunisia).

Based on recommendations of the ECOSOC, a United Nations ICT Task Force was launched in November 2001 to help harness the power of ICT for advancing the goals contained in the Millennium Declaration, in particular the goal of halving the number of

people living in extreme poverty by 2015. The Task Force's mission statement and action plan recognize the potential of ICT for promoting gender equality, and for enhancing women's educational, health and economic opportunities, and for participation in public life.

The Commission on the Status of Women, as part of its multi-year programme of work for 2002-2006, decided to consider the topic "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" as a priority theme at its up-coming session in 2003. The Commission's deliberations should also serve as a contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society. (The theme "participation and access of women to the media" will be the subject of a separate expert group meeting.)

II. Background

Information and communication technologies are usually understood to include computers, the rapidly improving communications technologies, including radio, television and mobile telephony, as well as networking and electronic data processing capacities, and the software for applications of these new technologies and capacities. Their defining characteristic is the capacity to harness, access and apply information and diffuse knowledge at electronic speed to all types of human activity, thereby giving rise to contemporary knowledge-based economies and societies.

This digital revolution is rapidly transforming social, economic, cultural and political interactions the world over. The Internet is emerging as a source of considerable potential for individuals, businesses and countries. In the year 2000, the Internet had 150.000 new users per day and 2 million web-pages were added daily. E-commerce, or e-business, is projected to grow from \$45 million in 1998 to \$7 trillion in 2004¹. Knowledge and information are essential in taking advantage of the opportunities presented by ICT, and have become commodities of value in their own right in the networked economy.

ICT have the potential to create new types of economic activity and employment opportunities, and enhance the quality of life. They have changed the nature of work, the range of occupations and skills requirements, making it necessary for workers to acquire a broader, and more adaptable knowledge base. E-commerce is creating opportunities for even small firms to market their products and services directly in a globalizing market. Education and training, and access to relevant institutions, are critical factors in taking advantage of ICT-related opportunities. At the same time, ICT are transforming education itself, and are creating new possibilities for achieving educational goals. Distance learning, life-long education, alternatives to formal education, as well as community-based learning are among the areas where important ICT-based applications

¹ "Report of the high-level panel of experts on information and communication technology" (A/55/75 E/2000/55);

are emerging. ICT have also brought improvements to health-care delivery, research and training, and the health sector has become one of the major areas where knowledge is shared and used through ICT. As an information- and knowledge-based tool, ICT have vast potential for participation, networking and advocacy among citizens, and for a variety of purposes. ICT also provide the means for enhancing interaction between Governments and their citizens, and can foster transparency and accountability of governance. National development frameworks are increasingly integrating components to enhance ICT access and use, legislative and regulatory aspects of ICT, and public-private partnerships for ICT.

The potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, social development and political participation is recognized, but it is increasingly apparent that the benefits are unevenly distributed between and within countries, to a large extent because of differential access to ICT, and differences in the knowledge base needed for optimal use of ICT. This has been coined the “digital divide”, or “information poverty”, to describe the difference between those countries, regions, sectors and socio-economic groups which have the resources and capabilities to access knowledge through ICT, and use ICT for a multitude of purposes, and those lacking such access and capabilities. It brings into focus the growing inequalities and income disparities, and inequitable patterns of development between and within countries. It is estimated that less than 8% of the world’s population currently benefits from the Internet². There are three time more PC’s in the Americas than in Africa and the 400.000 citizens of Luxembourg have more international Internet bandwidth than Africa’s 760 Million citizens³.

Even within regions, it remains a small minority of each society that has access to the global ICT network. Factors such as gender, levels of education and literacy, income, language, and race and ethnicity are critical determinants of access within countries. While the number of people connected to the global information society is expected to continue to grow very rapidly, the underlying patterns of differential access and benefit are unlikely to change without concerted efforts.

Women are increasingly taking advantage of ICT in all spheres of life, thus confirming that ICT can be a tool to promote gender equality and enhance the economic, political and social empowerment of women. At the same time, a “gender divide” within the digital divide is apparent and reflected not only in the lower numbers of women users of ICT, compared to men, but also in the persistence of gender-specific structural inequalities that constitute barriers to access. In particular, persistent inequalities between women and men at all levels of decision-making constitute serious constraints to women’s participation in shaping the role of ICT as a tool for development. Furthermore, as ICT reshape the world of work and commerce, educational opportunities and health systems, they have the potential to perpetuate existing gender-based inequalities in access, use and opportunities, as well as perpetuating gender-based educational, employment, health-related and other disadvantages for women. They may also create new forms of inequality between women and men.

² ITU World Telecommunication Development Report 2002.

³ ITU World Telecommunication Development Report 2002

It is thus essential to focus on the gender dimensions of the digital divide, not only to prevent adverse impact of the digital revolution on gender equality and to enhance women's equitable access to the benefits of ICT, but also to ensure that ICT can become a central tool for women's empowerment and the promotion of gender equality. Policies need to ensure that the gender perspectives of ICT access and use are fully addressed so that ICT actively promote gender equality, and ensure that gender-based disadvantages are not created or perpetuated.

III. Objectives

The expert group meeting will consider the impact of ICT on women and their use as a tool for the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality, in selected areas. It will address the challenges and benefits women encounter with regard to ICT and explore ways to close the gender-based digital divide. It will develop policy recommendations and concrete actions to be taken at national, regional and international levels, and by a variety of actors, that aim at securing the full benefit of ICT in pursuit of gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women.

In particular, the expert group meeting will address the following areas:

- a) **National ICT policies and gender equality:** Because of the growing impact of ICT on development, national development policies increasingly include attention to ICT. Such policies, including by setting the overall direction and priorities, and through regulatory approaches, shape ICT use, as well as the impact of ICT on national development. It is therefore essential to ensure that ICT components of national development policies are supportive of gender equality goals. The meeting will consider both the content of such ICT policies and the processes through which they are formulated. It will adopt recommendations which aim to ensure that Governments integrate gender perspectives into their national ICT policies and fully address the concerns and priorities of gender equality policies.
- b) **ICT as an instrument for participation:** The participation of women in decision-making is a critical element in ensuring gender-sensitive approaches and outcomes. ICT have the potential for overcoming many of the constraints to communication among individuals and groups in society. Increasingly, women are using ICT for networking and advocacy, and for enhancing their interaction with Government at different levels. The meeting will analyse ways in which ICT are enhancing women's capacity to act in the public sphere. It will also analyse ways in which ICT can provide a context for Governments to work more effectively for women, through increased quality and accessibility of public services, greater accountability and transparency, and enhanced participation of women in decision-making processes. It will develop recommendations for enhancing women's role in participation and decision-making at all levels and in all areas, and for improving gender-responsive participatory governance.

- c) **ICT as an instrument for enhancing women's capabilities:** Knowledge and information are necessary to ensure optimum benefit from ICT. At the same time, ICT are themselves a source of knowledge and information. Knowledge and information are also essential ingredients for empowerment. The meeting will analyse ways to ensure that ICT are a tool for enhancing women's knowledge and information base, and thus their empowerment. Focusing on a selected number of areas, the meeting will make recommendations to ensure that women have opportunities to develop the necessary skills for using ICT, especially to enhance their education, training, and health. It will also recommend actions to enhance women's capacity to produce ICT-based knowledge and information, and applications. It will further discuss the content of information and knowledge available through the Internet from a gender perspective, and make related recommendations.
- d) **ICT as an instrument for women's economic empowerment:** At the same time as ICT are creating new economic opportunities, they are also undermining some traditional or existing bases of livelihoods. The meeting will suggest measures for enhancing women's skills to take advantage of new economic opportunities, avoiding women's segregation into lower-paying ICT-related sectors, and strengthening women's access to new business and entrepreneurship opportunities, including through e-commerce.

IV. Expected outcome

The outcome of the expert group meeting will be a report containing a summary of the discussion and recommendations addressed to different actors at different levels on ICT as a tool for the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. The report will be widely distributed, including through the DAW Website. The findings and conclusions of the expert group meeting will also provide the basis for a report of the Secretary-General on this theme to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2003. The outcome of the Commission's consideration of this theme will be a contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, 2003 and Tunis, 2005).

V. Methods of Work

The expert group meeting will work in plenary session and in smaller working groups, based on the major issues identified.

VI. Profile of Participants

The expert group meeting will be attended by 8 - 10 experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as well as observers from Governments, entities of the United Nations system, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to the experts and consultants. In selecting the experts, the criteria of geographical and gender balance will be respected. The participants will be drawn from a variety of fields and expertise in accordance with the objectives identified above.

VII. Documentation

The documentation for the meeting will include: background papers by the Division for the Advancement of Women and a consultant's paper, commissioned by the DAW, outlining the major issues to be discussed; a paper prepared by the ITU; papers prepared by the experts on specific issues or case studies in line with their expertise. Observers will be invited to contribute inputs from their own perspectives. The expert group meeting will be conducted in English only. The documentation will also be in English only.