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Using New Technologies for Enhancing Women's Participation in EU Accession and Integration Discussions, a Case Study

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Using New Technologies for Enhancing Women's Participation in EU Accession and Integration Discussions, a Case Study

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> *"Europe is now on the right tracks to rapidly become an «eEurope ». But we haven't won this game. The ultimate success will depend on each of us*."
> *Erkki Likkanen, European Comissioner for Enterprise and Information Society*

1. Women's situation in the CEE region. Gender Equality and Economic Justice in CEE

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) women appear to be very much committed to democratic institutions and economic transition but at the same time they are poorly represented in decision-making positions and many suffer from their economies' decline. Gender discrimination in politics and employment, a lack of gender equality, and the impacts on women of transitions to market economies and of globalization worsens the effects of economic transition for women.[1]

Hence, participation in decision-making and enjoyment of economic rights and opportunities are two of the most fundamental issues for women in Central and Eastern Europe.

Women are denied many economic rights as employees, job-seekers and employers in the formal job market, as contract workers and members of the informal economy. Discrimination takes place in hiring, firing, calculation of wages and benefits, and access to credit. Those outside of the formal market lack legal, economic and social protection. Economic and social policies fail to recognize negative impacts on women or to protect women's needs and priorities.

Meanwhile, privatization, globalization, EU enlargement and **the spread of new information technologies** are rapidly changing the economic and social landscape. Such processes are shifting resources, eliminating some traditional occupations, and opening up new opportunities for those who have access to the necessary information, skills and capital. At the same time, educated women are losing ground, often becoming unemployed or underemployed; opportunities are lost young, talented women. New policies of privatization and decentralization that often relate to social safety nets such as unemployment benefits, pension reform, childcare and healthcare all have significant impacts on women. Yet national and regional policy-makers do not

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[1] Language and some excerpts describing women's situation in the CEE region are taken from the UNIFEM funded project "Gender and Economic Justice in EU Accession and Integration" developed by NEWW-Polska and KARAT

provide the data and conceptual frameworks to understand the gender-related implications of their policies or to support initiatives to ensure equal opportunities.

Starting with the beginning of the 90s (with the beginning of the transition process) women have started NGOs and launched movements to secure their rights and redress injustices. The Beijing Platform for Action helped to propel the CEE women's movements forward. But while the Platform for Action still stands as support, the women of CEE need a basis for continuing the momentum. In their struggle to achieve equal participation and opportunity, the women of CEE face two major challenges: developing the skills and connections to gain upper level positions of decision-making, addressing the economic injustices suffered by women throughout the region. One of the major chances they can execute their needs and strives is the EU Accession and Integration process.

2. Network of East West Women – former experience with ICTs

The Network of East-West Women/Polska (NEWW/P) is an independent Polish association that shares the mission and goals of the Network of East–West Women (NEWW) located in the United States. Registered in 1999, NEWW/P was founded to strengthen the NEWW's presence in CEE/CIS, as well as to develop and implement projects for the advancement of women in the region. Network of East West Women (NEWW) founded in 1991, the NEWW is an international membership organization.

The Network of East-West Women has connected women's centres to the Internet in East and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union already in the fall of 1994.[2] One purpose of connecting women's centres in the region to the Internet was to make all the resources on the Internet accessible to women organizations in CEE region.

The Network of East-West Women operates to a great extend with the use of ICTs. It runs a few listserves and a website (http://www.neww.org) The listserves are a major source of information on calls for papers, conference and symposium announcements, and job postings.

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[2] "NEWW On-Line was a high point in NEWW's effort to network women activists in the post-communist region. There were severe limitations to networking in those years. Phone calls were not only expensive, but required careful planning to take account of the six-to-12-hour time differences between the United States and the region; faxes faced most of the same difficulties and were difficult to send when electricity didn't always function. The Internet then was still something of a mystery except for a few computer experts, before graphic browsers for the World Wide Web were widely available, but as we learned about it, it seemed designed for NEWW's mission. E-mail could be written any time and responded to at any time. Cost was minimal in the U.S. and often cheaper than the alternatives in the region. Documents could be sent as attachments or copied and pasted into e-mail. Much valuable information was already available, pre-Web, via gopher and ftp. Moreover, the decentralization of the Internet was an ideal model for NEWW's non-hierarchical nature." (excerpt from the unpublished article by Sonia Jaffe Robbins, one of NEWW founders).

One of the listserves is called <neww-rights> and it was created following the April 1996 conference, "The Status of Women in New Market Economies" -- co-sponsored by NEWW, the University of Connecticut School of Law's Office of International Legal Programs, and the Connecticut Journal of International Law -- which brought together legal and economic experts from the region and the United States.

<NEWW-rights> includes bibliographies, relevant publications and text of articles, Internet resources, news reports, organizational profiles, and conference and job announcements.[3]

3. The project

How the project will benefit its recipients:

❑ It will introduce them to the EU, EU accession and EU gender equality standards and practices through a website, electronic news updates/reports

❑ Develop national-level experts.

❑ Promote identification of new partners (e.g. in trade unions, academia, and EU NGOs).

❑ Support activities at the national level: translation and dissemination of information about gender equality and EU accession, information kits for parliamentarians and media, and Alternative Reports re EU accession progress.

❑ Develop advocacy campaigns and project proposals [4]

A. Introduction

The project "Gender and Economic Justice in EU Accession and Integration" funded by UNIFEM will be implemented over 3 years by two organizations: the KARAT Coalition and the Network of East-West Women/Polska. It started with the beginning of 2002 in Poland and its recipients reside in the candidate countries and the region of CEE. **NEWW/P coordinates the information and communication component of the project.**

The reason that the two major organizations in the region started a project on the empowerment of women within the EU enlargement process lies in the fact that while enlargement is omnipresent in the CEE media, to date, there has been little civil society information and understanding of the enlargement process, little citizen involvement, and no organized women's participation to address women's rights and gender

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[3] Language and excerpts from the unpublished paper by Sonia Jaffe Robbins on the history of NEWW

[4] From the UNIFEM funded project "Gender and Economic Justice in EU Accession and Integration" developed by NEWW-Polska and KARAT

integration. Candidate countries and CEE women's groups need to identify, analyze and acquire the knowledge and expertise to advocate the issues they need to target. They need to learn from the experiences of women from countries that have recently become EU member states, such as Ireland, Greece, Spain and/or Portugal. They must build support within CEE and the EU not only to implement but also to further strengthen gender equality standards and mechanisms throughout the new Europe. This is a strategic opportunity for partnership with EU Women's organizations to reinforce the commitment to gender equality standards.

B. Candidate Countries and CEE Region

In most CEE candidate countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) the civil society has little information and understanding of the process, little citizen involvement, and no organized women's participation to address women's rights and gender integration.

For residents of many CEE countries, the Internet is now the only affordable connection with the outside world, as escalating telecommunications costs for phone and fax combine with bad economic conditions (which disproportionately affect women). Those who in the past were isolated by travel restrictions imposed by totalitarian governments are now often unable to afford to travel to wealthier Western countries.

Hence the project "Gender and Economic Justice in EU Accession and Integration" makes an extensive use and relies to a great extend on the ICTs. Through the website (http://www.neww.org.pl) and electronic publication called ACCESS, e-groups and listserves the project aims at reaching women and women NGOs, networking and distributing the advocacy materials to those who depend upon Web sites and Web accessibility to connection with the rest of the world. Our project's news updates "ACCESS" which are send to more than 300 subscribers every second week provide information and expertise needed for advocacy and lobbying. The website was visited by 700 visitors in October and the number of visitors is growing every week.

For many countries of Eastern Europe, Internet access of any sort is relatively new. Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were connected to the Internet only in 1991; Estonia, Latvia, and Slovakia in 1992; Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Romania, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine in 1993; Armenia, Lithuania, and Uzbekistan in 1994; Kyrgyzstan in 1995; Albania not until 1996. Basic e-mail, telnet, and ftp were the most used services by women's centers in this region for some time. By 1998, however, some had developed their own Web sites, and many women's organizations now have an online presence.

The three-year project will result in better information as well as debate on women's economic rights and gender impact of policies, improvement of gender standards and their implementation in the CEE, stronger institutional mechanisms for gender justice, and more economic justice for women in CEE. Through the alliances and partnerships between EU and CEE women, the project also hopes to foster better understanding and cooperation between the EU and other countries of Europe, towards

a vision for a European region where all citizens are equal, whether from the EU or CEE, whether women or men.

C. EU member states

On the side of the member states and citizens of the European Union, there is some reluctance about enlargement, particularly relating to economic impacts. Citizens from the newer members, e.g. Portugal, Ireland and Greece, anticipate the loss of huge subsidies. Farmers worry about competing with Eastern Europe. Trade unions are concerned about low wage labour. At the same time, **there is a general lack of information** regarding the strengths and potentials of CEE citizens, and more generally, their societies, cultures, economies and politics. T**he EU Accession process is seen as a window of opportunity to introduce women of Central and Eastern Europe, their society and culture to EU citizens.** Hence in the project one of the target audiences are the EU women's organizations and individuals.

D. Project activities

The www.neww.org.pl website and ACCESS newsletter show how the processes of EU Accession and European Integration offer opportunities to advance gender equality and women's economic rights in the region. Women throughout CEE can benefit from disseminating information in their countries about the European Union's economic, employment and social policies that benefit women. They can work to build collaborative relationships with EU women's NGOs, and facilitate understanding of and access to EU funds such as PHARE and TACIS by groups working on economic and gender justice in the CEE and CIS region.

We present on the website and in our publications:

- Gender equality standards that may apply to or guide CEE governments and citizens,
- How to use the an accession process by which the EU has leverage to require changes in candidate countries' legislation and evidence of effective enforcement mechanisms,
- Collaboration, partnership and solidarity of women's organizations, and
- Financial resources available for women and women's NGOs.

The project website and electronic publications:
- Identifies, analyzes and publicly debates the gender impacts of economic policies,
- Develop CEE women's understanding of and capacity to take advantage of EU standards, institutions and resources, and

- Build alliances between the women of CEE and the EU, and to promote an integrated Europe with strong political and economic commitment to gender equality.

The project aims to:
- Educate member organizations and women throughout CEE,
- Build a regional cadre of experts on the EU, gender equality and economic rights,
- Represent CEE women to the European Union,
- Foster connections between EU and CEE women's organizations,
- Launch model activities for replication at the national level, and
- Raise awareness throughout the region of gender issues and standards related to EU accession

through the website, e-groups and the electronic newsletter.

The website, e-groups and electronic publications serve the advocacy work through:
- Identification of partners in trade unions, universities and institutes dealing with economics, employment and trade; and build lobbying coalitions.
- Provision of information on meetings, conferences and trainings
- Presentation of results of opinion surveys in the European Union regarding citizen attitudes toward enlargement and CEE membership.
- Dissemination of information to NGOs, academics, parliamentarians, EU ambassadors to CEE countries, international women in CEE capitals, donors, and others involved with EU, Accession and gender (ideally including at least one representative from the Negotiating Team). The purpose will be to share information, discuss and collaborate regarding the EU accession process.
- Development of statements of women from the region through e-mail groups.
- Future provision of "Twinning Facilitation" meant to (a) develop and maintain organizations in CEE describing their focus, activities and experience to be potential partners for EU women's organizations, and (b) offer matching service (to help organizations throughout CEE find appropriate and reliable partners in the EU)
- Production of news updates and analyses re EU, EU accession and gender equality, opportunities and challenges of both (informal press releases regarding EU developments of importance to women for the CEE media, including posting on the website and automatic forwarding to journalists).

Electronic News Updates and Analyses: provide information every other week. It gives CEE women information about what is happening in the EU related to women, both from policies and developments of the EU itself and of its member countries. Recipients include members of women NGOs, women's information centers and the media. The information reflects what is of interest or suggested by women in the EU, and information for discussions and debates. It also informs about events in the EU or CEE that address women in each region or EU enlargement. This will be produced bi-

weekly, throughout the project. Project recipients have the opportunity to translate and disseminate information locally.

5. Recommendations

Within the first year of the project duration four priority issues for further activities were identified in relation to women and the economy in the CEE region:

- ❑ eliminating discrimination against women in the labour market
- ❑ increasing employment opportunities for older women
- ❑ diminishing the occupational segregation
- ❑ developing policies and actions supporting rural women

These challenges translate into specific recommendations related to the possibilities appearing with the broadening presence of ICTs in the region of CEE. The EU has its specific policies on the ICTs which have been already communicated to the candidate countries and if implemented they could serve well women in the EU candidate countries. They could also serve as a model for other countries in the CEE region.

European Union and ICTs[5]

The Barcelona European Council called on the Commission to draw up an *e*Europe action plan focusing on "the widespread availability and use of networks throughout the Union by 2005 …. and the security of networks and information, eGovernment, eLearning, eHealth and eBusiness.

This action plan will succeed the *e*Europe 2002 action plan endorsed by the Feira European Council in June 2000. *e*Europe is part of the Lisbon strategy to make the **European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy with improved employment and social cohesion by 2010.**

*e*Europe 2002, has already delivered some changes and has increased the number of citizens and businesses connected to the Internet.

The objective of *e*Europe 2005 Action Plan is to provide a favorable environment for private investment and for the creation of new jobs, to support productivity, to modernize public services, and to give everyone the opportunity to participate in the global information society. *e*Europe 2005 therefore aims to **stimulate**

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[5] Excerpts from "An Information Society For All Action Plan" prepared by the Council and the European Commission for the Feira European Council, 19-20 June 2000

secure services, applications and content based on a widely available infrastructure.

A. *e*Europe 2002, has already delivered some changes and has increased the number of citizens and businesses connected to the Internet. It is meant to provide opportunities for people to participate in society and helping the workforce to acquire the skills needed in a knowledge-driven economy. It's aim is to bring computers and the Internet into schools across the Union, bring governments on-line and focus attention on the need to ensure a safer online world.

B. The information society has a potential to improve productivity and the quality of life. The Lisbon strategy is not just about productivity and growth but also about employment and social cohesion. *e*Europe 2005 puts users at the centre. It aims to improve participation, open opportunities enhance skills. *e*Europe made an effort to contain measures regarding e-inclusion in all action lines. One important tool to achieve this is to ensure multi-platform provision of services. It is generally accepted that not everyone will want to have a PC. Making sure that services, especially online public services, are available over different terminals such as TV sets or mobile phones is crucial to ensuring the inclusion of all citizens.

C. The European Council in Seville had endorsed an Action Plan and invited Council and Parliament to adopt as quickly as possible the necessary legal and budgetary instruments to implement it.[6]

D. Specific recommendations arising from the Action Plan:

1. Reduction of **internet access costs** for households (with special focus on attracting women to make use of internet for information and for work reasons) which should result in faster increase of internet presence in low-income households, higher percentage of digitally literate women, facilitation of flexible work arrangements for women - part time home-working.

2. Increase in the number of **public internet access** points with special focus on attracting women through special advertising campaigns, stimulating interest of women-non-users by increasing for them 'visibility' of the net, affordable internet access for low-income groups (women constitute a great part of these groups), commitment of local administrations and governments to set up access points. E.g. in Poland there are so called telecenters in three villages in the Eastern part of the country. It would be useful to spread the project of setting up such centres all over the region.

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[6] It is important to note that the EU candidate countries adopt EU legislation and follow the guidelines set by the EU. In case of the eEurope Action Plan the candidate countries developed their national Action Plans e.g. ePoland.

3. Implementation and usage of digital technologies in schools (stimulation of interest of women in ICTs - as a means of addressing the skills gap in the labour market, more women equipped with the skills needed to live and work in the information society. Adapting teacher education curricula to the requirements of the information society, Adapt school curricula to enable new ways of learning using ICT with special focus on stimulating interest of women in using the ICTs.

4. Availability of financial resources for women to purchase equipment (computers, software, network access).

5. Setting of low cost systems for network maintenance for women NGOs and setting special women's centres with access to internet.

6. Financial support for women NGOs working in the area of ICTs (e.g. providing trainings, setting portals)

6. Creation of equal digital opportunities for women (ICT training and information schemes addressing the special needs of women. Improved opportunities for re-employment of women, Increased employment rate of women, commitment of public employment offices e.g. for funding training schemes),

7. Provision of child care provision whilst women are participating in training/programmes, well developed work-family policies, including the provision of sufficient child care places

6. Improve the computer and internet literacy among elderly women (Increased skills basis required for using advanced services such as tele-supported home care, better opportunities to bridge the, 'generation gap', facilitated communication between elderly women and distant relatives, active co-operation with interest groups representing elderly women, co-operation with retirement homes and improvements in ICT usability for women, affordability of services)

7. Support for women with disabilities to use digital technologies (better information about existing solutions, products and services, development of new communication interfaces/improved usability of existing interfaces, improved conditions for social integration of women with special needs, regulatory framework requiring accessibility to tele-matics products and services for women with disabilities, funding schemes for development of innovative services and user interfaces, affordability of services, establishment and publication of 'design for all' standards, increased employability of people with mobility restrictions)

8. Regular surveys to gather the required data on women's use of ICTs

9. Raising awareness for the importance of further ICT based measures against social exclusion (Best practice' initiatives facilitating replication of these practices in other regions, encouragement of governments and interest groups to provide information

society services for women, provision of specific information focusing on the value added for the target group rather than deliver general messages, defining clear objectives for awareness raising campaigns, Combine awareness measures with practical proposals for follow-up activities (e.g. opportunities to participate in seminars, initiatives)

10. Setting up women's portals on the web with information on women's health, training possibilities and jobs.

11. Trainings for women on the use of ICTs in their everyday life as well as in social and political activities and work.

6. Another example of the use of ICTs for women's empowerment in the region[7]

"ICT to overcome the New division - Lithuanian women train to get online"

Women in rural and less developed areas in Lithuania are training to go on the Internet. A three-year initiative is going to help more than 800 women and their organizations harness the power of information and communications technology (ICT).

The project will set up five regional cyber centres and provide equipment to women's organizations and develop training methods and an ICT handbook in Lithuanian. It will also set up a Women's Information Portal on the Web, with features such as a digital library, a database of women's groups, mailing lists, and a search engine.

The Japan Women in Development Fund is providing US$275,000 for the project, which the Ministry of Social Security and Labour is carrying out in cooperation with UNDP.

Although access to these new technologies is expanding fast in many countries, in Lithuania it remains relatively low. A recent survey found that four out of five Lithuanians have never used the Internet, and only 3 per cent of Lithuanians ages 15 to 74 use it on a daily basis.

Most Internet users are located in six major cities, and most are men, indicating a need to promote wider access for women and to ensure that communities throughout the country can take advantage of new economic, social and political opportunities that ICT can offer.

The project will offer training in a full spectrum of information technologies for participants, including leaders of non-governmental organizations. It will improve information flow in their organizations and enable women to be more involved in social, political and economic activities at the local, regional and international levels.

Jurgita Peciuriene, chairwoman of the Women's Issues Information Centre, called the initiative a big achievement for all Lithuanian women. "This project will empower women

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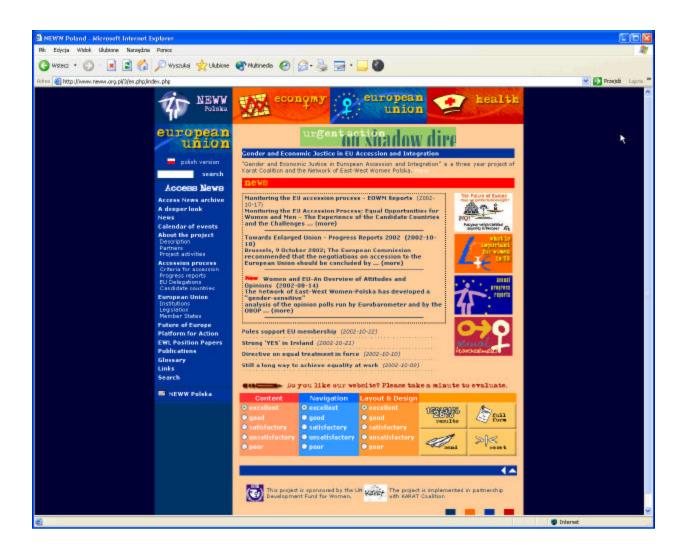[7] From an e-mail communication with Marcia Greenberg

by providing basic and advanced knowledge of ICT, and most importantly, they will have an opportunity to improve their lives and will help other women," she said.

They will be able to make contacts all over the world, Ms. Peciuriene noted, and the Women's Information Portal will enable them to "feel the pulse of the political, economic, social life and to be active partners in changing it."

Cihan Sultanoglu, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, said the project is the first of its kind and scale in Lithuania, combining a focus on gender and ICT for development. "It is also happening at the right moment, with the country entering a new phase with the preparation of the second National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women".

7. Appendix

A. Project website

B. ACCESS news – bi-weekly electronic news update