United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
Expert Group Meeting on
"Information and communication technologies
and their impact on and use as an instrument
for the advancement and empowerment of women"
Seoul, Republic of Korea
11 to 14 November 2002

National ICT Policies and Gender Equality
Regional Perspective: Asia

Prepared by

Chat Ramilo *

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, many government development strategists 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. The digital divide reflects both old socio-economic and political divisions that are exacerbated by the introduction of new ICT, as well as new divisions created due to the nature of the new ICT. 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

---

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

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

With the convergence of ICT and the emergence of what is being called 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. This democratizing aspect of ICT has recently been threatened by new legislation introduced by governments against terrorism in the aftermath of September 11th. Government reaction to combat terrorism have resulted in ICT policies and regulatory mechanisms that raises legitimate concerns from civil society about their impact in restricting civil liberties and human rights.

These currents in the global ICT environment are important in understanding the gender issues in policy development in Asia.

Gender and National ICT Policies

In reviewing and developing policies and corresponding strategies and programs, it is critical to ensure that the gender dimensions are equally addressed. Unfortunately, discussions around gender and ICT concerns have mainly transpired in the spaces of international and regional conferences. There is a telling absence of more direct and pro-active gender advocacy in the ICT and telecommunications policy arena on the domestic or local fronts.

In November 2001, ESCAP commissioned a research study of six countries (Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, Philippines and the Republic of Korea) to map a regional ICT policy framework and legislation environment from a gender perspective and draw recommendations directed at narrowing the gender digital divide.

The main findings in this study demonstrated the lack of attention to gender equality goals and women's advancement in national ICT development frameworks and strategies.

The key result areas that are common in the policy frameworks of all the countries covered in the study were: provision of networking and telecommunications infrastructure, facilitating e-commerce and job opportunities, human resource development, and promoting good governance and citizens' participation. A number of key result areas can be considered distinct if not totally unique in some cases. Australia's IT policy framework, for example, is closely integrated with its support for the arts and

---

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

culture sectors. Japan, on the other hand has a relatively elaborate framework in promoting regional cooperation in IT.

On the level of strategic IT development plans, India has placed great emphasis on its bourgeoning software development industry. Malaysia for its part has a strong interest in addressing the impact of IT on labor, specifically the emergence of teleworking.

For the most part, existing national IT policy frameworks and strategic plans are generally silent on gender or women-focused concerns. Gender is not an explicit theme in national IT plans. Although the digital divide is generally referenced by most national IT policy frameworks, marginal sectors are basically treated as a disaggregated bloc tacked under the general heading of human resource development.

Most of the policies that have been adopted are directed at creating the enabling environment for the development of human resources and the growth of the IT industry. Only more recently have there been more government efforts in harnessing ICT for national development and supporting its governance functions. Disappointingly, even in these efforts, the adoption of gender equality goals has been left behind.

There are however some notable developments. In the case of the Republic of Korea, for example, there is a conscious and deliberate process to integrate gender equality agenda into the national IT policy framework. In the area of policy planning and management, the Australian government implements gender-aware statistical and data gathering methods in relation to its IT and e-commerce policy.

An examination of the gender and development program of the six countries yielded similar results. In most countries, science and technology and access to information and communications resources are not implicit key result areas in government's gender mainstreaming initiatives. The wide gender gap and in some cases the total absence of any gender consideration in national ICT policy frameworks are the major stumbling blocks in developing gender policies and plans that are gender-responsive at the national level. [3]

Gender Equality Goals in ICT policies

Advocacy for gender issues in ICT first gained a foothold during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995. 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

---

[3] Chat Garcia Ramilo and Pi Villanueva, "Are ICT Policies Addressing Gender Equality?" Research paper for the Economic And Social Commission For Asia And The Pacific, December 2001.

to participate fully in their growth and impact. The recommendations in the Platform focused on increased access and participation of women to expression and decision making in the media and ICT in order to overcome negative portrayals and stereotypes of women in media and communications.[4]

In recent years, new issues have emerged which directly relates to the development and social function of ICT. Traditionally, communication has been identified as a particularly sensitive and strategic area for women's advocacy and action, since it is an intrinsic part of the social system of transmitting values and reinforcing -or transforming- gender roles. With the shift towards the information society, women's concerns in ICT have broadened its scope. In addition to addressing specific issues of women in communications, it also relates to the need to address new manifestations of gender discrimination and to define new areas of women's rights, so as to ensure that the benefits of the technological revolution do not exclude women nor other sectors of society. [5] The way these issues are handled by policy-makers will have far-reaching implications on women's participation in shaping of ICT and on their share in the social and economic benefits derived from ICT.

Universal Access - The Asian Digital Chasm

It is almost impossible to characterize the ICT environment in Asia in common terms. The conditions in the region are far too diverse to capture in this paper. Perhaps an "Asian digital chasm" is the most apt description of the state of overall ICT development in the region.

The first evidence of this chasm is revealed though universal access data in various countries in the region. Topping the list of countries with high internet access are Korea 56% and Singapore (44%). In the median section are Malaysia with 14% and Brunei Darussalam (11%). Further down the line are Philippines (6%), Thailand (4%), and Indonesia (1%). Countries like Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are at the bottom of the heap with less than .1% Internet diffusion.[6] Among countries in the Caucuses and Central Asia, the internet is primarily accessible in the largest urban centers and technical services and support are often slow and expensive. Access figures are mostly under 1%. [7]

---

[4] Malcolm, Shirley M., "Knowledge, Technology & Development: A Gendered Perspective" <www.wigsat.org/malcolm.html>

[5] Burch, Sally and Leon, Irene. "Directions for Women's Advocacy on ICT: Putting New Technologies on the Gender Agenda". Networking for Change: The APCWNSP's First 8 Years. APCWNSP, Philippines, 2000. p.31.

[6] Emmanuel C. Lallana, ASEAN and the Internet, Presentation at the Forum on "Constricting Cyberspace: Examining Internet Rights After 9/11", September 24, 2002, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Philippines.

[7] I on the Mouse: ICT for Women's Advocacies and networking in Asia and the Pacific, Asian Women's Resource Exchange, Philippines, 2001, p. 36.

Telephone connectivity is markedly higher than internet access in the region although figures follow the same pattern. While the deregulation of telecommunications in many countries have resulted in increased telephone density, figures remain on the low side starting from 1% and not exceeding 20%.

An assessment done by e-ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) of 2001 on e-readiness in its member countries accentuates the deep divide in the region. The assessment found that the level of e-readiness is very uneven across the region with infrastructure development largely determining overall readiness. It confirmed that market-led policies has a high correlation with infrastructure development. The study also uncovered that all member countries are confronting a lack of locally created content and application. Worth noting is a recommendation to increase access through improved geographical and gender balance. [8]

In most countries, sex disaggregated access data do not exist at all. Even without accurate figures however, poorer infrastructure in rural and remote areas means lack of access for majority of women who live in rural areas.

A research study on women's organization's use of ICT in 23 countries in the Asia and Pacific region confirms the persistence of universal access issues despite the many gains in advancing women and gender concerns in the use of ICT.[9]

The findings from the study show there is a definite urban bias in ICT access and use by women's groups in all countries. Geographical terrain and economic liberalization are factors that largely mediate access and connectivity. The lack of national policies promoting ICT as a tool for development is also a significant factor in many countries surveyed. Poor ICT infrastructure, including outdated telephone lines, long installation periods, overloaded networks; limited competition; high connection and servicing fees are commonly found in Central Asia, the Caucuses, Pacific Islands and developing countries in the region.

E-governance - Philippines Case Study

In the last couple of years, E-governance has become a priority area of many Asian governments resulting in the implementation of various programs that apply ICT in delivering government services and promoting transparency and accountability. Beyond these goals however, E-governance is being more closely defined alongside concepts of governance. The delivery of government services and information to the public using electronic means is

---

[8] Emmanuel C. Lallana, ASEAN and the Internet, Ibid.

[9] The findings of the study has been published in "I on the Mouse: ICT for Women's Advocacies and Networking in Asia and the Pacific". The research was initiated by the Asian Women's Resource Exchange was coordinated by Isis International-Manila, UNESCAP and the Association for Progressive Communications.

differentiated as e-government. E-governance, on the other hand, is defined as the transformation of (governance) processes (resulting from) the continual and exponential introduction into society of more advanced digital technologies. E-governance focuses on how these new technologies can be used to strengthen the public's voice as a force to reshape the democratic processes, and refocus the management, structure, and oversight of government to better serve the public interest.[10]

Defined in this way, e-governance becomes significant in the exercise of citizenship and direct public participation in government activities. Both are key elements in women's empowerment and achievement of gender equality. It can potentially bring forth new concepts of citizenship, both in terms of needs and responsibilities. For many governments in Asia however, allowing E-governance to make it possible for their citizens to truly communicate with government, participate in policy-making and strengthen democratic processes remain a huge challenge. Three barriers immediately come to mind. First, the serious gaps in universal access to ICT as a means of participation; second, the complete absence of gender equality consideration in E-governance plans of governments and; third, the restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of expression imposed by undemocratic and fundamentalist states that seriously put into question citizen's access to information and participation in political processes.

The Philippines is a good case study that illustrates the first two barriers. In July, 200 the Philippine government adopted the Government Information System Plan (GISP) as the country's master plan for reforming governance through ICT. The GISP sets the enabling policy, institutional infrastructure and environment, direction, priorities and benchmarks for computerization of key government operations and activities over the next five to ten years. It is envisioned as the blueprint for an electronic bureaucracy that is widely and readily accessible to its constituency. The plan fails to deliver in two fronts.

First, it is gender blind and totally devoid of any provisions that address gender gaps in access, education, government services and political processes.

Recent interviews conducted with the main government agencies responsible for the country's national ICT programs and key government departments delivering public services, reveal that policy-makers have not thought of factoring in gender in their e-governance projects at all. In fact, the first question that was invariably asked in these interviews was "What does gender have to do with ICT or with E-governance projects?" Personnel in IT units, management information systems divisions, women's bureaus and

---

[10] Bill Mead, e-Governance: Toward a Practitioner's Definition.
www.aspanet.org/publications/COLUMNS/archives/2002/08/mead0813.html

gender and development technical working groups equally shared this same puzzlement.[11]

Even when the basic elements of gender mainstreaming are in place, none of those responsible for gender mainstreaming in these departments had any awareness about gender issues in relation to ICT programs or projects within their department. Most of the personnel were familiar with ICT mainly through: the use of email in their work, their information work for their department's website and the use of their department's intranet. None of the gender and development programs or projects were related to ICT directly. Awareness about the differences of perspectives, roles, needs, and interests of women, and men in relation to ICT was absent. At the same time, there was very little understanding that E-services may entail specific planning requirements that take into consideration women's and men's access, know-how and control over ICT.

Second, the GISP sets an unrealistic target of ensuring that every citizen have online access by 2010 in a country where key economic and connectivity problems remain. Available data about access to the Internet indicates that the digital divide is very real with figures ranging from a low 2% to a high 6% of the population with internet connection. While teledensity is higher at 9.05 per 100 person, majority of Filipino homes do not have a phone because they cannot afford it or the infrastructure is not available. The most positive development in telecommunications access in the country is the phenomenal growth in mobile telephony and the popularity of SMS or text messages as a source of information. While sex-disaggregated data is almost impossible to find, general access information indicate that women's access to the internet is marginal, concentrated in main urban centers and skewed towards the educated and the middle as well as upper classes.

Trafficking of Women through the Internet, Pornography and Censorship

Organizations working on the issue of women's trafficking have long problematized the impact of the internet on the trafficking of women and children and on the proliferation of pornography. While they have recognized the reality that traffickers and pornographers have also moved into the Internet to further their business, women's organizations have been also too aware of the dilemma of calling for government action against this.

The large and growing presence of pornography on the Internet has been used to argue for the need to have stricter policies on content. There have

---

[11] The author conducted a gender assessment of the Philippine government's gender capacity in E-governance. The gender assessment was commissioned by the Canadian International Development Agency's for its "E-governance for Efficiency and Effectiveness Program" which will provide US$8million in bilateral cooperation funding to support the Philippine government's E-governance program.

been calls on developing technology that will not only filter content but will track down creators and clients of pornographic websites. Legislations like the new Communication Order Act in the Republic of Korea, which has introduced an Internet Content Rating System, illustrate this point. The Ministry of Information and Communication of the Republic of Korea maintains that the legislation is intended to protect young people from harmful Internet content by mandating websites to rate their own content through installing a software called PICS (Platform for Internet Content Selection). Individuals can then set their own 'limits' and determine which websites their web browsers can view. Some civil society organizations who are not favor of this regulation say that imposing the installation of the PICS software in the public institutes, schools, medical institutes, and libraries infringes on the people's right to know and their Internet access. They point out that this software indiscriminately blocks access to websites dealing with sex, homosexuality and other legitimate and educational content.[12]

The use of the Internet to perpetuate violence against women and as a platform for hate or racist speech and opinions (or other forms of exploitative and offensive behavior) is naturally of great concern to everyone, particularly women. With the absence of any viable alternatives to control this side of the Internet, people tend to turn to the state to provide protection and to curtail such use. The response to date has been to give governments carte blanche with respect to over-developing legislation and regulations, which amount to state intervention and censorship.

The problem here is that much of this legislation is open to wide interpretation in regard to what the State might consider 'harmful' or 'illegal'. Combined with alarming trends in cooperation and collaboration between state security services, the aim of which is primarily to cooperate in the sharing of information gathered through surveillance and monitoring of the Internet (and some other communication devices), the human rights implications are obvious.

No one has been able to offer concrete alternatives, which satisfy the various needs, and demands the situation present. What is clear and must be a priority however, is that women need to be informed and involved in the discussions and debates that must take place around this emerging trend. They must also participate in the development of any policies and practices that are advocated by state agencies and other bodies involved in this area.[13]

ICT as a Public Good

The breaking up of monopolies in telecommunications, and the influx of private investments have made communication infrastructures more

---

[12] Source: Internet Content Rating System: Simply Protects Youth from Harmful Media? http://www.base21.org/show/show.php?p_dv=0&p_cd=209&p_docnbr=18633

[13] Internet and ICT's for Social Change. Ibid

accessible. One can argue that on this account, the interests of private capital, government and citizenry have converged.

There is no easy way to negotiate between the private sector's imperative to make profit and the social imperative to maintain telecommunications as a social service and as an enabler of people's political participation. Growing concerns that the exercise of citizenship is being reduced to that of choosing which brand of cellular phone to choose from is not unfounded. So while the influence private corporations bear upon the formulation of national ICT policies is a reality, it is also problematic from the perspective of a policy agenda that asserts communication as a right and as a basic social service.

There is *de facto* consensus among actors and agencies active in the international policy arena around the necessity for a tripartite approach to ICT policy formulation. This approach has been unevenly adapted across the region and it is safe to say that on the national policy arena, non-state and non-business stakeholders have not consistently been invited to sit around the table. Not to mention, providing opportunities for women's participation in ICT decision making bodies. This is illustrated by the case of the Philippines, where the committee tasked to hammer out the national ICT strategy is co-chaired by government and business, the sub-committees are dominated by representatives of software and IT companies and the one seat reserved for civil society is reserved for a representative of consumers' groups.[14]

Cybercrime

One of the most important democratizing aspects of the Internet, often overlooked, has been the creation of private online spaces. They include having secure online spaces where women feel safe from harassment, 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 in overcoming oppression and exploitation.

However, government legislation in some countries are threatening privacy and security. Legislation, such as the Wiretapping Act in Japan has been put in place, together with technical resources, to enable state interception and monitoring of private Internet communication. International agreements are being made between states to combat "cybercrime" by intercepting private email correspondence. These developments have been given a new impetus by the events of September 11th, 2001. In the name of "the war against terrorism" serious challenges to fundamental privacy rights are being made. Recent moves by the US government and some European countries call for increased international collaboration in increased profiling of citizens particularly for cross-border purposes, increased powers of surveillance, re-definition or revision of anti-terrorism legislation, compulsory retention of

---

[14] Ramilo & Villanueva, "Are ICT Policies Addressing Gender Equality?", Ibid

'traffic' data and increased sharing of retained data between more government agencies, extending beyond law enforcement agencies to tax, health, education, social service agencies. While most of these legislation have been introduced in North America and Europe, the same models are now being adopted in Asia, certainly in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Malaysia.

There are primary human rights principles at stake if cybercrime legislation do not conform to universal human rights standards. The current version of the cybercrime treaty contains vague and ambiguous definitions of 'serious crime' and 'terrorism' which can be interpreted so widely as to indiscriminately target government and corporate dissent opposition on the Internet. In Europe, new legislation has resulted in the erosion of long held data protection principles and reduced judicial oversight requiring less oversight in issuing of warrants and interception orders. Retention of data including private email means increased data pools, which can be mined and used to more easily profile communities. [15]

In the aftermath of September 11th, the ASEAN Telecommunications Ministers quickly set up the ASEAN Network Security Coordinating Council to "manage information and network security issues including the protection of ICT infrastructure and misuse of ICT". National-Level Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) were established in all ASEAN countries to oversee the "prevention, detection, and resolution of security-related incidents on computer networks". At the second ASEAN Telecommunications Ministers Meeting in August this year, the Philippines' Telecommunications Transportation and Communications Secretary, called for the "implementation of so-called cyber-security mea-sures to address massive disinformation and unauthorized dissemination of data and images over the Net."[16]

Consequently, the current restrictions being imposed on the use of ICT will have an impact on women's political participation, a critical element in ensuring gender-sensitive approaches and outcomes. Women's use of ICT for networking and advocacy, and for enhancing their interaction with Government at different levels could be severely constrained.

Points of Intervention

There are real imperatives for mainstreaming the gender agenda in national ICT policy frameworks and for building critical constituency for such a process. Despite the gains in gender and ICT advocacy in the international policy arenas, the gender and ICT agenda has yet to be taken up actively by

---

[15] Privacy and Human Rights 2002: An international survey of privacy laws and developments, http://www.privacyinternational.org/survey/phr2002/
[16] DOTC chief takes on old job, bats for 'cyber-security', http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2002/aug/28/business/20020828bus8.html

most governments. During the United Nations General Assembly Special Session to Review the Beijing Platform for Action, government representatives showed little interest in taking up mounting demands to consider ICT as a major gender and development issue.

However, the increasing interest among some state actors to build in human resource development and development strategies into existing national ICT frameworks could facilitate governments' interest in gender responsive ICT policies. Among non-government organizations including women's groups, there is a growing interest to play a more active role in influencing national policy formulations that impact on women and their relationship to ICT.

The following are possible points of intervention from which to build up the gender and ICT agenda in the national policy terrain.

1. Developing gender and ICT indicators

Identifying gender indicators in ICT initiatives, whether in policies, strategies, programs, projects and activities can be an effective way of ensuring that women's particular needs are considered in planning processes. Gender-sensitive indicators are useful tools in measuring or evaluating the impact of development initiatives in general and can be applied in the ICT field. While there is a rich body of gender indicators that have been developed in areas like health, education, human rights and political empowerment, development of gender indicators or even general development and social change indicators for ICT initiatives is only just beginning.

The need for developing such indicators has been expressed in many forums dealing with evaluating the impact of ICT projects for development. For example, after many years of piloting telecenters in various countries, many of these pilot projects are being evaluated on how access to the Internet have improved the lives of rural communities in terms of their livelihood and empowerment. From a gender perspective, gender indicators will help in identifying and understanding the gender related changes associated with an ICT intervention over time. They focus both on understanding how this change affect gender roles and responsibilities and how initiatives respond to practical and strategic gender needs. Gender indicators can also help measure the impact of interventions on gender equality at the individual, household and community level ad well as the ICT sector.

Indicators need to be both quantitative and qualitative. For example, many of the national ICT plans examined in this paper include expanding IT education and human resource development as major key result areas. All these plans use base figures and set quantitative targets, which are not gender disaggregated. Many studies have confirmed that women and girls are under-represented in general science and technology fields and this is true in IT education as far as the more technical fields of study and jobs are concerned. Qualitative indicators are more difficult to ascertain because

these indicators probe into the people's judgments and perceptions about a subject. Qualitative indicators seek to measure the impact of a project or an initiative and are therefore used to evaluate the long-term effects and benefits. For example, qualitative indicators are particularly useful in understanding and evaluating the impact of women's access to ICT. Women's participation in planning and decision-making often makes it possible to ensure that women and men equally share in the production, consumption, distribution and appropriation of ICT.[17]

2. Integrating gender analysis in national ICT policy frameworks and policies

The need to review national ICT policy frameworks and examine it from a gender perspective has been mentioned earlier in this paper. The wide gender gap and in some cases the total absence of any gender consideration are major stumbling blocks in developing gender policies and plans that are gender-responsive at the national level. Including gender analysis in technology policy ensures that resulting policies and regulations address the needs, requirements and aspirations of women.

The initial measure could be taken to convince national IT policy making bodies to apply gender as a cross-cutting component in all its policies in much the same way that gender mainstreaming is being implemented by many governments. Work in this direction can start with the key result areas that are common in the policy frameworks of the countries studied for this report -- provision of networking and telecommunications infrastructure, facilitating e-commerce, human resource development, and promoting good governance and citizens' participation.

One of the lessons learned in the well-documented success of the Pondicherry village information centers in Chennai, India has been that women-managed knowledge center located in a common place is a good strategy to attract higher number of women users when compared to other knowledge centers.[18]

3. Building government's commitment to the advancement of women for their ICT platform.

Gender sensitization training has been a preliminary step in gender mainstreaming which has been proven effective in the past. Policymakers and state actors need to be made aware of the specific issues related to ICT impact on women. The emphasis on agencies involved in telecommunications, science and technology is necessary since these are the

---

[17] Gender and Evaluation Methodology for ICT Initiatives, Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme. www.apcwomen.org/gem
[18] "Best Practice on Information Technology: Information Villages at Pondicherry - Bridging the Digital Divide", Asia Pacific Gender Equality through Science and Technology, http://www.unesco.or.id/apgest/infotech/practices.shtml

state entities that are directly involved in developing and implementing national ICT policies and strategies. Strengthening gender mainstreaming within the premier institutions responsible for implementing a country's ICT development plan is essential.

At the same time, there is also a need to build constituency among gender advocates about the importance of national ICT plans for women's empowerment and gender equality. It is important for advocates who want to actively participate in shaping national ICT policies to note that they are not starting with a blank slate. There are existing national ICT frameworks and strategies with clearly defined key result. The need is towards building a knowledge base to support advocacy through studying how to develop gender components within current ICT laws, programs and projects of the government to increase women's access and involvement in these areas.

4. Promoting gender responsive E-governance

Gender responsive governance is the active and meaningful participation of women in all levels of decision-making and ensuring greater transparency and accountability in government. This definition echoes the concepts of citizenship and direct public participation in E-governance.

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. In the region, 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. One problem is that at both the global and national levels, decision making in ICT is generally treated as a purely technical area (typically for male experts), where civil society viewpoints are given little or no space, rather than a political domain. Deregulation and privatization of the telecommunications industry is also making decision-making in this sector less and less accountable to citizens and local communities further compounding decision-making and control of resources for women.

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. This is important in a number of spheres. One is to do with creating the conditions and regulations that will enable women to maximize their possibilities of benefiting from ICT, and two is about ensuring the accountability of the institutions that are responsible for this valuable resource.

5. Addressing universal access issues

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. This should be the strategic starting point for policies that address universal access.

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. Locating public access stations such as kiosks in places where women frequently congregate can enhance women's access to information and services. One solution lies in providing structures where individuals can access Internet-based services locally.

ICT strategy must not be generic. Instead specific models must be tailored to respond to the needs of different levels of society. The important concern should be on the kind of services governments will offer. Government services must clearly identify target constituents and 'give its citizens a reason to access these services'.

An essential part of universal access is the need for governments to conduct information literacy to promote the notion of the information society. Online government services have to be made known to potential users, many of whom may not be aware that such services are available online

6. Adopting a rights-based approach ICT policy development

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 justice, and inspired by equitable gender, cultural and regional perspectives. [19]

---

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