What About Gender Issues in the Information Society?

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Abstract

Despite the work of many gender and information and communication technology (ICT) advocates from different stakeholders around the world, scant reference is made to several critical gender and ICT issues when information society issues are discussed at any level. A fully informed gender perspective should encompass the diversity and specificity of concerns of different sectors of women both in the North and in the South. This chapter seeks to emphasize that the principle of gender mainstreaming should be adopted when discussing women's role in the information society, taking into account their communication rights and their demand for full participation in ICT development more widely. This includes challenging their portrayal in the new media, considering their labour rights in the ICT work market, making radical changes in education policies, ensuring women's participation in science and technology, encouraging their access to decision making and working toward equitable redistribution of available resources in the ICT field.

ICTs are one of the fields where gender relations take place, sometimes reinforcing old roles, sometimes changing them, but making us aware that the social and cultural context has an impact in ICT development and use, and that it is not possible to think of new communication technologies as gender neutral. The absence of women's voices and perspectives in the information society also shows us that power relations in the new media replicate in many ways those in conventional media. The globalization of communications produces new challenges and impacts that must be considered in relation to gender equality. Women's access to information sources and communication channels are crucial if they are to attain democratic participation, respect for their human rights and an equal voice in the public sphere.

Convinced that ICTs can be an empowering tool for resistance, social mobilization and development in the hands of people and organizations working for freedom and justice, the women's movement has become an active participant in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Women are struggling to ensure that gender is a cross-cutting principle when discussing ICT policies at all levels, international, regional and local. They encourage democratization of policy processes within the ICT sector, including use of ICT tools to support this process, and to formulate and implement ICT

policy using principles of openness and fair participation. This collective participation in the communications field is also an essential element for women's empowerment.

Introduction

Despite the work of many gender and information and communication technology (ICT) advocates from different stakeholders around the world, scant reference is made to several critical gender and ICT issues when information society issues are discussed at any level. A fully informed gender perspective should encompass the diversity and specificity of concerns of different categories of women both in the North and in the South. This chapter aims to emphasize the fact that a principle of gender mainstreaming should be adopted when discussing women's role in the information society, taking into account their communications rights and their demand for full participation in ICT development, which includes challenging their portrayal in the new media, considering their labour rights in the ICT work market, making radical changes in their education and participation in science and technology, encouraging women's access to decision making, and the equitable redistribution of available resources in the ICT field.

One of the achievements of the global women's movement was the consolidation of Section J on Women and the Media in the Beijing Platform for Action during the preparatory meetings to the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women. The relation between the media, new communication technologies and the advancement of women became one of the critical areas of concern discussed during the conference, thanks to the activism and efforts of thousands of women worldwide. They felt that the lack of gender sensitivity in the media and in the emerging ICTs had to be addressed in order to involve women in an expanding industry and field of knowledge with an increasing social and cultural impact and influence in development policies.

The two strategic objectives stated in the Platform for Action in 1995 have become the basis for women's advocacy work in communications and their struggle for the advancement of women in a field where they had felt excluded and manipulated. These objectives are:

- Strategic objective J.1: Increase the participation of women in expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.
- Strategic objective J.2: Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

Eight years later, the need to reaffirm these aims is urgent as the rapid growth of telecommunications, digital, cable and satellite technologies, the emphasis on speed and the miniaturization of technologies that enable people to carry last generation communication devices in their pockets, frame people's behaviours, thinking and way of living (Gill 2003).

New communication technologies are a vehicle of a process of globalization that takes place on unequal terms, and that often increases social and economic inequality, between and within countries and people; at the same time, these technologies can be an empowering tool for resistance, social mobilization and development in the hands of people and organizations working for freedom and justice.

Gender relations in ICTs, whether they reinforce old roles or change them, highlight the impact of the social and cultural context on ICT development and use, and the fact that new communication technologies are not gender blind. The absence of women's voices and perspectives in the information society also shows that gender power relations in the new media replicate in many ways what has happened in conventional media.

A human-rights approach is framing the debate on women's rights in the information society. The women's movement believes that women's rights to information and communication can enhance opportunities for democratic governance, the exercise of citizenship and full participation in development for all (UNCSW 2003a:2, paragraph 3). On the other hand, to focus the debate and the political activism in and for ICTs within a frame of human rights and human development encourages women's involvement. When women associate ICTs with the struggle against poverty, unemployment, violence, racism, discrimination and the consolidation of democracy and economic growth, their participation in ICT programmes and policies gains force, impact and social relevance (Bonder 2002).

Between 1998 and 2000, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) organized a series of regional conferences around the world on Gender and Communication Policy. Communicators from women's and feminist organizations met to discuss their role in the information society and called for making women's right to communicate a reality in order to construct civil processes and strengthen democracy. Participants in the Latin American regional conference considered that for women's right to communicate to be made effective and real, it must include:

- freedom of expression and the free circulation of ideas;
- the right of access to information and the right to be properly informed;

- the right of access to communication channels as sources of information, as expressions of self-identity, and as active subjects in the construction of democratic citizenship;
- the right for women to have their own channels and to produce communication messages;
- the right to count on legal frameworks, and economic and technological conditions for women's development in this sphere; and
- the right to participate at decision-making levels in communication organizations both public and private (WACC 1998:5).

Could ICTs Open New Channels for Women's Participation and Decision Making?

Is it possible to use Internet communications and other ICT tools to modify the situation of women's citizenship and the standing of their rights? Could we say that ICTs open new channels for participation and decision making in the social and public spheres? Past experience tells us that access to the media can modify the power structure in society. Control over knowledge and information is an important source of power and that is where the media are relevant. It is always striking that women, who make up half the world's population, have to struggle to get their voices in the media. According to a feminist, "Globalization also means patriarchy becoming more powerful, more entrenched" (Bhasin 1994:5).

One of the most successful women's information networks in Latin America was born out of an urgent need to produce news and information with a gender perspective to strengthen the national women's movement, affirm women's right to communicate, and break the dominating discourse in the media that distorted the real issues in the debate on reproductive rights. In 1992 the Mexican women's movement was starting to participate in the preparatory process for the UN Conference on Population and Development that would take place in Cairo, Egypt, in two years' time. It was evident that information was concentrated in only one place, Mexico City, and strongly influenced by a few voices, mainly belonging to patriarchal power structures wanting to keep their control on women's bodies and their decisions on their sexual and reproductive health. Women's organizations in other Mexican states felt isolated from all the information generated in the women's movement, the debates, political analysis, up-to-date news and the planning of future strategies and actions. Women could not afford communication by telephone or fax, and the post was too slow. A feminist activist, who was working at the time in the state of Yucatan, felt that isolation and lack of communi-

cation were weakening all initiatives. The need to link women's organizations nationwide became a priority, and she decided to launch the creation of an electronic communication network. With a minimal infrastructure and some previous training on the use of electronic mail, a group of women started Modemmujer, an information and communication network that aimed to strengthen women's participation in this process. During the first years of work, in combination with well-established technologies (radio, fax, print media) and repackaging information available online, Modemmujer was able to bridge the distance between women's organizations and decision-making processes (Sabanes Plou 2000).

The need to strengthen their political participation encouraged Indonesian women's activity in the field of ICTs. In 1998, when women's organizations that had been demanding the end of the Suharto regime came together to work for democracy in their country, they saw that in order to influence the new political process and have a voice in decisions on the country's future, they had to build their own communication strategy. They wanted to share their ideas and proposals with as many other women activists as possible. With women's organizations spread across the many islands of the extensive archipelago, it was crucial to identify a means of distributing and exchanging information speedily at the lowest cost. A Web-based free mailing list service became a feasible option. The Rumpun email Perempuan (Women's Mailing List) was launched in July 1998 with a handful of subscribers, which had multiplied by 10 in two years. The mailing list covered action alerts, announcements, news clips, statements, press releases and discussion topics strictly on women's issues and activism. By putting into practice their right to communicate, Indonesian women were able to build together strong positions on issues of national interest (Buntarian 2000).

How can women better the development of their communities or play an informed role in public life, without access to pluralistic information, the means of public expression and sharing knowledge? How can women work toward a new geopolitical order governed by norms of peace and mutual respect without channels of communication for dialogue and exchange of information? When ICT policy is linked to women's human rights issues, as stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, it can be seen that ICTs offer a potential for the defence and advancement of these rights. Women worldwide are using ICTs to monitor the promotion and protection of their human rights, using the Internet to denounce violations, send alerts and campaign for their rights. They are also using ICTs to facilitate communication among organizations, thus empowering the networks that work to ensure that women have equal rights. Gaining access to legal information (law and other legal instruments, new legislation and legal recourse, and

accountability procedures) via the Internet enables them to discuss human rights issues with authority and thus further their struggle against any sort of discrimination either under law or practice (IWTC 2003).

In a successful use of the Internet in campaigns against violence on women, the Kenya-based African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), launched the Men to Men Initiative in 2001 to mark the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence on Women. The campaign targeted men to promote male involvement and action to combat gender-based violence at the regional level in Africa. In Costa Rica, Radio FIRE (Feminist Interactive Radio Endeavour), the first Web-based feminist radio station in Latin America, organized a 25-hour marathon in 2000, broadcasting a special programme on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. FIRE asked women from all over the world to contribute material for the programme and invited other radio stations worldwide to link in simultaneous broadcasting. For this effort, Radio FIRE received the Peace Builders Award during the IV World Encounter on Non-Violence (WomenAction 2000 2001).

The globalization of communications produces new challenges and impacts that need to be considered in relation to gender equality. Women's access to information sources and interchange channels are crucial for their democratic participation, the respect for their human rights and for intervening with an equal voice in the public sphere.

Gender Issues in the Information Society

"Old" patterns in the "new" media?

The "new" ICTs already reflect many of the gender patterns (in relation to power, values, exclusion and so on) that have been evident for decades in relation to the "old" media. Indeed these patterns cannot be divorced from patterns of gender relations in society as a whole. Neither old nor new media by themselves can offer solutions to this problem. Their structures reflect much wider social, economic and political relations in which women tend to be marginalized. For instance, the new media—just like the old ones—are primarily vehicles for the transmission of ideas, images and information. An issue for women, in relation to both old and new, is who decides on access, content and control. In essence, many of the issues are the same as they have always been since they refer to questions of power and power relations in the context of gender.

At present, women's organizations feel that, although more women with university degrees are in the communication field and more grassroots women are trained in communication skills, little has been

gained when it comes to access to decision-making bodies, breaking the glass ceiling in private or public communication companies, or even taking part in policy making at the local or national levels. During the Beijing+5 revision process, women communicators in Latin America issued a document entitled *We Met Our Commitments, Did You?* (WomenAction 2000 2000) in which they described the achievements of the women's movement in the region in meeting Section J objectives. They also questioned governments and the private sector about their efforts and achievements in the area, which were very limited at the time and have not advanced much since then.

Although there are thousands of Web pages belonging to women's organizations or alternative media that give space to women's issues and concerns, newspapers and news agencies using the Internet maintain the same policies as in their print versions. Technology has changed, but the fundamentals remain the same. Women's absence from information is crucial because today the media play a decisive role in the building of the public agenda. The media highlight certain agendas or issues by prioritizing some and ignoring others, or by conferring a voice or an image on some social actors and not on others. As a consequence, the media (and its presence on the Internet) disseminate an image of the world in which women are portrayed in a discriminatory and disempowering manner, or simply do not exist. Their invisibility as social actors results in the fact that their viewpoints and concerns are under-represented in the debate that defines the public policies that rule our societies.

Women's portrayal in the media is an urgent challenge that needs to be addressed across all regions and all types of media (Spears et al. 2000). There is still a sexist and stereotyped portrayal of women in the media, and there is a need to work with media professions to create a media environment that promotes gender equality by fostering positive images of women and women's views. Several women's organizations in different parts of the world have developed strategies for lobbying and advocacy in the area of gender-based violence. In 1998, the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) organized workshops to sensitize journalists as part of a campaign to lobby for amendments to the Law of Marriage Act which, according to research commissioned by TAMWA, condones domestic violence, denying women and children their rights. The workshops mobilized media coverage and helped women in their advocacy for review of the law. In Nepal, Sancharika Samuha (Forum of Women Communicators) has focused on using the media to address violations of women's human rights. They challenged the mainstream media campaign against granting women the same rights to inherit property as men. The group was able to place articles on equal property rights in the press, produce and air radio jingles and television advertising, distribute posters and hold workshops with journalists and

NGOs. As a result there is a new awareness among journalists and the general public of women's side of the story (Gallagher 2001).

Another issue to consider is that the image of women on the Internet often reproduces a model that reinforces stereotypes and prejudices that already exist in society and shape the role of women as social actors and their capacity to influence public life and in the discussion of public issues. The Internet is not free from sexist images and rhetoric. It is also being used increasingly to spread violent pornography and paedophilia, and for the trafficking of women and girls. The women's movement believes that policies that seek to redress this use of the Internet should under no circumstances be used for centralized control of all other content development on the Web (GSWG 2003). There should be policies to encourage the corporate sector to eliminate the violation of women's rights online and the Internet service providers to undertake efforts to minimize pornography, trafficking and all forms of gender-based violence online by re-examining their own editorial/user policies from a gender perspective (IWTC 2003).

Defining ICT development from a gender perspective

Access to ICTs 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—in developed countries, 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. 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 majority have no buying power and no access to modern means of communication. That women are in the deepest end of the digital divide has been the main message of gender advocates working in ICT development (APC WNSP 2001).

A key priority that has guided the women's movement in the last decade is the intersectional approach. This takes into account the diverse needs and perspectives of women coming from different geopolitical, historical, class-based, racial and ethnic contexts. The women's movement considers that strategies and solutions for achieving gender equality, including ICT development, must strike at the root of unequal power relations—not just between men and women, but more funda-mentally between rich and poor, North and South, urban and rural, empowered and marginalized (GSWG 2003).

Women are under-represented in all ICT decision-making structures, and ICT policy currently rests on the assumption that

information and communication technologies are gender neutral and that women must adapt to technologies, rather than have ICT policy specifically formulated to meet the interests and needs of women. It is becoming clear that without active intervention by gender activists, new ICTs are unlikely to make a positive contribution to gender equality, sustainable development and democratization of communications.

Experts in gender and ICT issues consider that "there is substantial evidence to support the contention that policy making in technological fields ignores gender issues" (Hafkin 2002:3). Gender analysis has advanced substantially in social and economic fields, but is rarely used when it comes to the consideration of information and communication technologies. Gender differences and disparities have been ignored in policies and programmes dealing with the development and dissemination of improved technologies. As a result, women have benefited less from, and been disadvantaged more by, technological advances. Women, therefore, need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies in order to avoid new forms of exclusion and ensure that women and girls have equal access and opportunities in respect of the developments of science and technology (APC WNSP 2001).

An evaluation of gender relations in a telecentre in an underprivileged neighbourhood found that parents did not want their children, especially girls, to go to the telecentre, because they considered it a "den of ruffians"—the telecentre had a special programme for out-of-school youth. Less than 2 per cent of users were girls. Evaluators saw that these girls hardly used the computers. Instead, they sat beside the boys and watched how they surfed the Internet, played games and worked on the computer. All of the trainers, managers and technical support staff of the telecentre were males; there were two female members of the staff who provided administrative and logistical support. The management realized that the lack of participation of girls in the telecentre was indicative of the initiative's failure in meeting the needs of the community and young people. New programmes and services for girls and young women are being planned to overcome this situation. This is an example that should be looked at in a wider context: what should policy makers do to ensure that the gender gap will be closed in the ICT field?

Educational programmes fostering the use of ICTs among women, particularly girls and young women, are highly instrumental and gender insensitive. There is a need to develop educational projects that stimulate critical and creative skills, and encourage greater participation of women in the design and production of new technologies. Lack of acknowledgement of gender inequities in all the social areas, and in the technological and scientific fields in particular, is responsible for the absence of gender-fair policies in this area. Many women lack the

educational and cultural capital to administer the immense flow of information that the Internet offers and that cannot be provided through mere access to computers. Intelligent and selective connection demands much more time than women usually have, because of family and work duties. The lack of infrastructure and technological skills prevent women from becoming producers of new content and formats that are attractive and powerful from the communicational point of view (Bonder 2002).

> Education is the single most important factor for increasing the ability of women and girls to participate fully in the new information society at all levels. This requires a comprehensive set of interventions raging from quality public education for all, through scientific and technological education and research (Global Unions 2003).

Unfortunately, several studies show that, when it comes to computer studies, teachers pay more attention, and dedicate more time and encouragement, to boys rather than girls. It has been observed that most girls feel tense when they have to work with computers in the presence of other people, especially of boys. This has to do with the pressure from boys, who sometimes make the girls feel ridiculous in order to dominate or show off their own skills. It is also known that male students in university computer labs often send pornographic messages to their female classmates or even post the messages on the walls. In spite of protests against this kind of sexual harassment, university authorities have not put in place any policy measures to stop this behaviour. If girls and young women show little interest in computer studies, is it because of some sort of "natural" technophobia or is it because a male-dominated cyberculture acts to reject them, or even to offend them? (Bonder 2001).

> Sometimes, collateral cultural factors, other cultural attitudes based in gender bias, and not the immediate gender identification of technology use, prevent young girls and women from accessing and using ICTs (Hafkin 2003:5).

Research carried out by the Commission on Technology, Gender and Teacher Education of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation came to the conclusion that girls are critical of the computer culture, not computer-phobic. Sherry Turkle, professor of sociology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and co-chair of the commission, said that results showed that instead of trying to make girls fit into the existing computer culture, the computer culture must become more inviting to girls. Some of the commission's major conclusions show that girls find programming classes tedious and dull, computer games too boring, redundant and violent, and computer

career options uninspiring. Girls also show clear and strong ideas about the kinds of games they would design: games that feature simulation, strategy and interaction. The girls' critique points to a more inclusive computer culture that embraces multiple interests and backgrounds and that reflects the current ubiquity of technology in all aspects of life. In this framework, to be technologically literate requires a set of critical skills, concepts and problem-solving abilities. Based on its findings, the commission is working on a new definition of computer literacy and equity. It acknowledges that obtaining gender equity in this field means using technology proactively, being able to interpret the information that technology makes available, understanding design concepts and being a lifelong learner of technology. In its recommendations, the commission states that girls should be educated to be ICT designers and not just users. Educators and parents should help girls imagine themselves early in life as designers and producers of technology, stimulating deeper interest in ICTs and providing opportunities for girls to express their technological imaginations (AAUW 2000).

Many of the concepts underlined by the AAUW are evident in feminist uses of ICT. In feminist use, women are not seen as consumers; rather, they are encouraged to develop content where analytical skills, computer concepts and innovative uses of technology play an important role. Women's electronic networks have created opportunities for women to learn about ICT tools in order to maintain dynamic relationships, which empower and allow them to build strategies and policies for the advancement of their rights.

"This issue of the role of women in creating the knowledge embodied in ICT networks is a key educational one" (Kirkup 2002:11, see paragraph 1.8.3). Women in their daily electronic networking have been able to create multiple points of access to ICT literacy. These practices have allowed them to recognize themselves in the culture of computing and have helped them to overcome barriers created by gender bias. Women have found an instrument for their empowerment and emancipation in communication technologies. The Internet has allowed the voice of ordinary citizens and organizations lacking strong financial resources to be heard. As the Internet provides a unique public sphere where decisions that shape people's lives can be freely debated and considered, small groups and individuals, men and women—previously working in isolation from one another—have been able to communicate, network, share information and prepare actions in ways they were never able to before (APC WNSP 2001). While more women are now taking part in this new technological practice, the dangers of deeper exclusion for those who do not have access to ICTs are, unfortunately, only too real for the majority of women, especially in developing countries.

In Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, community telecentres have become friendly environments for women's access to ICTs. The use of open source software with low technical requirements and training in local languages encourages women's interest in ICT access in areas and social groups with scant technological resources. Women can find opportunities there to merge newer technologies with other technologies in which they have experience (such as radio and video), as well as indigenous and traditional forms of communications (WomenWatch and WomenAction 1999). In community telecentres women can be trained not only in technical aspects, but also in the strategic uses of digital technologies for social change. In one of the telecentres that Chasquinet sponsors in a neighbourhood outside Quito, Ecuador, women came together to organize a micro-business that would help them to market their production of marmalade. The fact that they learned how to use computers to organize a marketing plan and advertise their products on the Web was only one side of the experience. They were also able to create a community of interests and exchange, paying attention to other needs in the neighbourhood that were demanding their participation. "The best ICT projects are those that are not introduced as ICT projects to give women access or get them connected, but are integrated seamlessly into those women's lives and concerns" (Gill 2003:7).

Overcoming language barriers and lack of local content have also been a concern when encouraging women's use of ICTs in rural and poor communities. The high number of illiterate women and the fact that most of them work in the informal economy to provide for their families puts forward an important challenge for those working in ICT development with a gender perspective. An interesting experiment in the Nakaseke Multipurpose Telecentre in Luweero District, central Uganda, showed that technology by itself could not have achieved the expected results without an accompanying tool produced in the local language, Luganda, and with content geared to women's needs and interests. The use of a CD-ROM in Luganda to enhance women's skills in the economic field has opened the way for women participating in the local telecentre to learn more, undergo training and train others in the use of this new tool. Anastasia Namisango, a 70-year-old woman who has become a trainer and successful poultry producer, thanks to the use of ICTs, said in an interview that she teaches other women and men how to use the CD-ROM because "I don't want to see women crying about poverty when they have all the resources" (Women's Worlds 2002). The CD-ROM entitled *Ideas for Making Money* was developed by the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC), based in the United States, with the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the East and Southern Africa Office of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

ICTs and women's working lives

ICTs offer new job opportunities for women in communication centers, telemarketing, mobile telephones and the software industry. Thousands of women now work in data processing, for example. Women also have good self-employment opportunities as teleworkers, using ICTs from their homes. In developing countries, ICTs even alter the pattern of production in the informal sector, which recruits women in large numbers. According to a report from the International Labour Organization (ILO 2001), the role of women in the digital era is concentrated in the area of information and online work. Women's income in this new economy is higher than normal. However, gender discrimination exists, because men usually get the better positions and women carry out less-skilled tasks. The report notes that the diffusion of the technologies is according to skills and therefore accompanied by rising wage inequalities. Although there is pay inequality between those with ICT skills and those without, pay polarization also exists within ICT use itself and this polarization is often gender-based.

But the gap is also present among women themselves. Class, education and age restrain most women from getting higher positions in the ICT job market. Women also complain about working conditions in the area of telemarketing, call centres and data banks, where they are the majority. They are concerned about possible health hazards brought about by repetitive work in high-pressure working environments. And while wages and conditions of work in call centres appear to vary widely, the worst of them have been called the "sweatshops of the digital era". Teleworking has also raised some concerns. While it has created new employment opportunities for women, it could also have potential negative effects on the quality of working life. Women could find themselves excluded from better career possibilities because, instead of finding a balance between family and paid work, they could get caught in a difficult situation with new demands on top of the old. The ILO report recommends the formulation of adequate policies to protect the labour rights of women workers in the ICT industry.

When formulating policies on ICT work, the challenges that women face in adjusting to the new demands, and their responses and organizing strategies when confronted with such challenges, should be taken into account. According to Swasti Mitter (Mitter et al. 1995), radical thinking about training in ICTs that takes into account the obstacles that gender and class pose to a trainee will be essential in using human potential to the full. Women play an unconscious role in reproducing the gendered nature of society and of the wider ICT sector. They still need to overcome internal barriers and conquer technophobia. In order to do this, women need to maintain a political perspective (Hafkin 2002). However, important progress is being made in the "soft" side of technical

knowledge, such as communications and user-producer interaction. Women in this sector are doing much better than in traditional technical professional work, like engineering. Positive advances could enable women to achieve greater economic and social opportunities.

Working for engendered ICT policies

One of the most important points of intervention for women working in ICT is the policy arena. ICT policies at the international, regional and national levels must be addressed in order to create an appropriate technological culture and adequate policies for women. Without a gender perspective on the issue, new ICTs will continue to develop at a rate and in a direction that is bound to alienate women.

There is a lack of acknowledgement on the part of governments of gender inequities in social areas, and particularly in the technological and scientific fields. As a result, there is an absence of gender-fair public policies. There are very few gender activists, researchers and educators involved in this field, and those who are working on the issue have not really co-ordinated their efforts, which could help them influence national and regional policies. Taking these facts into account, during the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW) Expert Group Meeting in Seoul, Korea, in 2002, it was agreed that two things are crucial when working on ICT policies with a gender perspective:

- sensitizing policy makers to gender issues, and
- sensitizing gender advocates to information technology issues (Hafkin 2002).

With these two needs in mind, women should work for gender representation in the power and decision-making arenas of ICTs, in ICT privacy and security as it impacts gender, and gender representation in the ICT industry and labour force. A gender perspective should be present when working on policies in technological fields; tackling issues such as access to infrastructure, social and cultural issues; financial resources; content that meets women's information needs; advocacy/ networking activities; and participation in business, entertainment and education. The gender gap will be bridged:

- if women also have the means to access knowledge necessary to be actors in development, and not just objects of development;
- if women and women's concerns are present at all levels of development, from grassroots to board rooms and cabinet tables; and

- if gender dimensions and consequences for all decisions are taken into account, including those issues that are not obviously women's issues (Malcom 1999).

The Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) was formed in 1998 to respond to the challenge posed by the need to access ICT knowledge and encourage women's key participation in development policies. Since then, AWORC has grown to be an active and energetic Internet-based network of women's organizations and resource centres, developing co-operative approaches and partnerships to increase access to, and applications of, new information and communication technologies for women's social and economic development. In 1999, AWORC held the first Asian Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT99) in Sookmyung Women's University in Korea. More regional workshops were held in the following years and in 2002, WENT national workshops took place in Malaysia and the Philippines. WENT regional trainers have started to work with nationally based women's organizations and ICT trainers to develop and run WENT-modelled training workshops, which are designed to reach out to women and organizations interested in raising their capacity to use ICT for their social action and advocacy work. The workshops also aim to enhance women's training skills and their capacity to develop and run ICT training for nationally based and/or community-based ICT training for women and their organizations. A similar event took place in Africa for the first time, with a WENT workshop organized by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Africa-Women in Cape Town, South Africa, in April 2003. Participants and trainers worked together to share skills, and discuss gender and ICT policy issues. Networks such as AWORC and APC Africa-Women, equipped with working experience as well as a theoretical understanding of women and ICT, are ready to participate in the ICT policy development to ensure that these policies fully adhere to the needs and realities of women (Cinco and Garcia 2000).

Karat, a coalition of women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), is leading an ICT project to better understand women's economic rights and the impact of economics, employment and social policies on women. The project aims to produce information and initiate debates on women's economic rights and the gender impact of policies to improve gender standards, and their implementation in the CEE. Karat members say that, while the enlargement of the European Union has been getting a lot of coverage in the CEE media, 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 integration. They believe that CEE women's groups need to become more active in addressing women's rights in the context of European integration, and that there is a strategic opportunity for

partnership with European Union women's organizations to reinforce the commitment to gender equality standards. With the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Karat has been able to create an active network that shares electronic news reports and joint bulletins, teaches advocacy by example, disseminates information about gender equality and EU accession, and produces alternative reports and information kits for parliamentarians and the media. They have also been able to hold training workshops for activists from CEE countries (Karat 2002).

Mainstreaming Gender in the WSIS Process

Convinced that ICTs can be an empowering tool for resistance, social mobilization and development in the hands of people and organizations working for freedom and justice, the women's movement has become an active participant in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). By participating in the discussion of the main documents, it has contributed relevant input to the debate that civil society encourages around the main WSIS topics.

> The information society should be based on principles of gender equity, human dignity and gender justice, and should be geared towards the eradication of gender disparities in education and training, socio-economic status, civic and political decision-making (APC WNSP 2003).

One of the main demands by women's movements has been the adoption of a principle of gender mainstreaming throughout all aspects of the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan. This has not happened, and women's organizations working in the WSIS process want official documents to recognize the centrality of gender inequality to the broader social inequality.

Women's organizations are also concerned about women's participation in the decision-making processes on ICTs policies. They know that unequal power relations and other social and cultural aspects have contributed to differential access, participation, control over and access to resources and status for men and women. They would like WSIS to take into account a number of commitments made by governments in the Beijing Platform for Action, like article 13 in the Beijing Declaration that reads:

> Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (UN 2001).

Discussions and policy development on gender equality on the one hand, and on ICT and media and communication systems on the other, tend to be carried out in parallel and are almost never interconnected at the international, or even the national, level. ICT decision making is more commonly considered a technical rather than a political or social issue. In March 2003, the UN Commission for the Status of Women discussed the issues of participation and access of women to the media and information and communications technologies. Government representatives encouraged a high participation of women in WSIS and reiterated the strategic objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document, *Gender Equality, Development and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*, that resulted from the UN General Assembly Special Session to review the Beijing conference (Beijing+5) in 2000 (UN 2001). They also recalled the UN Millennium Declaration, which

> resolves to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable, and to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications technologies, are available for all (UN 2000).

The Commission urged governments to take action, to prioritize

> the integration of gender perspectives and ensure women's early and full participation when developing and implementing national policies, legislations, programmes, projects, strategies and regulatory and technical instruments in the area of information and communications technologies (ICT) and media and communications (UNCSW 2003b:2).

It also recognized the need to build constituencies for gender equality in ICT developments within civil society and governments. Monitoring and evaluation of such developments should also include gender impact analysis.

But no policies can be planned or implemented without proper financing. Women's organizations recommend in their proposals that WSIS should

- develop and implement gender planning and budgeting guidelines for the allocation of public and public-private partnership resources with respect to investment in ICT infrastructure, projects and programmes;
- encourage investment in the development of low-cost technologies and non-text-based computer interfaces using iconographic software and voice recognition to facilitate ICT access for poor, illiterate women; and
- take steps to finance open source technologies and software that will facilitate women's access to ICTs (APC WNSP 2003).

Women activists are struggling to ensure that gender is a cross-cutting principle when discussing public policies and have committed themselves to take a gendered approach to all activities, including information and communications. They encourage democratization of policy processes within the ICT sector, including use of ICT tools to support this process, and to formulate and implement ICT policy using principles of openness and fair participation. This collective participation in the communication field is also an essential element for women's empowerment.

After three decades of feminist research, theorizing and analysis, women are in a better position to confront the problems thrown up by ICTs than they had been in relation to the old media, which they critiqued in a fairly simplistic way, at a time when feminist analysis was still in its infancy. Also, in some respects—although in different ways—both governments and civil society now recognize (some of) the claims of the women's movement, rather than dismissing (or ignoring) them as they tended to do 20 years ago.

During the African Regional Preparatory Meeting for WSIS, in Bamako, Mali, in May 2002, women representatives from NGOs and other communication organizations met by invitation of UNIFEM and organized the Gender Caucus which now meets during the regional conferences and the preparatory committees (PrepComs). It released a declaration in Bamako that brought up relevant issues of concern for the women's movement, which were rapidly adopted by women activists globally to lobby in the national, regional and international processes concerning WSIS. The declaration was addressed to the United Nations system and agencies, regional organizations, national bodies and public sector, African private sector, private, public and community media, the research community, civil society and the women's movement. They were urged, among other things, to:

- work toward ratifying treaties and protocols that recognize women's human rights including the right to communication;

- develop training and capacity development programmes that can raise awareness of the gendered nature of the information society and identify strategies for ensuring fair and equitable participation by men and women;
- increase access to ICT facilities through making arrangements that support achievement of universal access targets and defining specific targets for women's access to ICT;
- ensure that gender equity is a cross-cutting principle and commit themselves to take a gendered approach in all activities, including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and in the structure of civil society organizations themselves;
- promote cultural diversity in the implementation of national ICT strategies including through active use of local languages and provision of information on strategies in various media including community radio and non-electronic media;
- ensure that there is gender equity in education, specifically by providing opportunities to increase girls' literacy, and by providing access to fair and equitable participation in science and technology education and training at all levels;
- support use of ICT for women's empowerment including through application of ICTs in health, education, trade, employment and other women's development arenas;
- promote national languages and local content to ensure the widespread participation and inclusion of women;
- ensure that local knowledge, including local gender knowledge, is given importance in media content, and steps are taken to establish standards of reporting which include gender dimensions (Gender Caucus 2002).

On many occasions, women's organizations have declared that they favour a communication system at the national and international levels, based on democratic principles, that limits the monopoly in the globalization of telecommunications. They have also worked toward information and communication societies where development is focused on fundamental human needs and clear social, cultural, economic and environmental goals; where priority is given to the alleviation of poverty and other inequalities in a way that is environmentally sustainable. Achieving control in communications and in the ICT field is important to ensure that the resources and benefits of the information and communication society are distributed equally between women and men.

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