



The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in the Development of African Women

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Abstract

This paper sets out to look at the question to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in relation to women's development in Africa. The emphasis is on current issues and the paper highlights key issues and challenges faced by women in Africa and to a smaller extent, globally. The paper provides examples of good practice and includes recommendations to Civil Society Organisations on how to create an enabling environment for women to access and use ICTs for development. The crucial link between understanding the gender dimensions of the Information Society - in terms of what women's needs are and a thorough understanding of conditions of access, policies - and the potential ICTs have of boosting the economic, political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality is explored. An extensive resource list and examples of successful initiatives from the field are included in appendices.

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Introduction

The last few years have been a period of immense growth and interest in ICTs amongst Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). There is no longer a debate about whether to engage with ICTs or not. Most CSOs are choosing to actively engage with new technologies. How to apply ICTs strategically in organizational work is where the debate has moved. A greater sense of the need to own and control ICTs is evident. The debates now concern how to apply ICTs to the developmental challenges facing Africa. Civil Society Organizations, governments, donor agencies and to some extent the business sector are exploring appropriate mechanisms for harnessing ICTs for development. Although there are the concomitant dangers of exploitation, dominance and profiteering rather than sharing and social upliftment, most civil society role players are of the same mind – new technologies can be applied for social change.

However, the reality of access to ICTs in Africa is stark. There are only 14 million phone lines for 816 million people. That is fewer than the number of phones in Manhattan or Tokyo. Eighty per cent of those lines exist in only six African countries. There are only a million Internet users on the entire continent compared with 10.5 million in the UK.

Women's ICT access in the developing world is generally confined to a small elite of high income, urban-based citizens. Although women represent a growing proportion of Internet users in many countries, in most of these the overall levels of access are extremely low. Significant numbers of women are currently online in only a small number of countries outside of the developing world. But even in the industrialised countries, where overall connectivity is high, gender-specific constraints shape and define ICT use.

ICTs are not a panacea to social evils and they can and do easily reinforce social inequity. But the reality is that exclusion from new technologies means exclusion from access to information, local and global debates and the power to contribute to critical policy debates.

The tremendous importance of the ***socio-cultural context of technology*** was apparent throughout. Technology does not operate in a vacuum. Information technology in itself cannot combat constraining socio-cultural forces.¹

Although the 20th century saw the advent of Internet tools, women living and working in Africa are still vulnerable to poverty, racism, war and the particular scars of colonial legacies. Given the many environmental and structural injustices and obstacles faced by women in Africa, the networks which have existed for years and which continue to develop are created according to evolving needs and use various

¹ Are ICTs gender-neutral? A gender analysis of six case studies of multi-donor ICT projects By Nancy J. Hafkin. **UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs.Seminar One: Are ICTs Gender Neutral? 1-12 July 2002**

means to communicate. Local networks may meet face-to-face, national and regional networks may produce and communicate through newsletters or radio programmes. Workshops, conferences and meetings create the space not only to work together but also to document processes and develop a stronger information base. Increasingly African women's networks with access to the new technologies of the Internet are utilising these tools. The speed of these tools, particularly email (which is relatively cheap and the most accessible feature of the Internet), enables effective networking and quick communication.

"ICTs bring profound changes to our communities. They influence how we know and understand the world. They change work methods and the ways in which we communicate. They affect how we access and share information. They are also an important source of power. By acquiring the equipment and skills to use them, we gain access to that power." ²

Every time we make information available and when it serves human advancement, we are participating in the democratisation of society. And every time we fail to do so, we not only stand in the way of that process, we also serve to break down the building blocks of that very democracy. Access to information (read knowledge and power!) is critical for social transformation and development. Not only is it a basic human right, it also provides a tool for mobilization and participation in decision-making processes.

What this means in real terms for 'information brokers' including CSOs, the media, teachers, doctors – anyone who is committed to sharing and spreading information – is that we have to disseminate information as widely as possible across all kinds of barriers – cultural, language, political, social. Through access to basic information (from information on primary health care to how to apply for a pension) we need to create a culture of information exchange, forming networks across all sectors to ensure that information becomes real and useful and empowers more people than merely those who have the means to acquire information. We need to ensure that it reaches the audience for whom it is intended.³

CSOs in Africa who are 'privileged' with access are often frustrated by the lack of indigenous content and the large volumes of information from the North that often bears little relation to local lives. This means that ensuring access to the technologies is not enough. They need to be shaped and adapted for use in local contexts.

ICTs are understood to include computers, the rapidly changing communications technologies (including radio, television, mobile telephony and Internet), networking and data processing capabilities, and the software for using the technologies. ICTs provide us with the capacity to harness, access and apply information and disseminate knowledge in all kinds of human activities, thus giving

² The Internet : Getting Connected, published by the African Gender Institute and Women's Net

³ Boezak, Sonja. 2000. **The Politics of Location**. Unpublished.

rise to the information- or knowledge-based economies and societies. These have the potential to create new types of economic activity and employment opportunities, thereby improving the quality of daily life. For example, ICTs are changing the way business operates through e-commerce applications, and have brought improvements in health-care delivery. As an information and knowledge-based tool, ICTs can enhance networking, participation, and advocacy within society. They also have the potential to improve interaction between governments and their citizens, fostering transparency and accountability in governance as a result.

GENDER AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Information and communication technologies could give a major boost to the economic, political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. But that potential will only be realised if the gender dimensions of the Information Society – in terms of users' needs, conditions of access, policies, applications and regulatory frameworks – are properly understood and adequately addressed by all stakeholders. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers are among the factors impeding access to the ICT infrastructure, especially in developing countries, and these problems are particularly acute for women. But women's access to ICTs is constrained by factors that go beyond issues of technological infrastructure and socio-economic environment. Socially and culturally constructed gender roles and relationships play a crosscutting role in shaping (and in this case, limiting) the capacity of women and men to participate on equal terms in the Information Society. Unless gender issues are fully integrated into technology analyses, policy development and programme design, women and men will not benefit equally from ICTs and their applications. And unless there is an awareness of the potential of new technologies to further entrench differences, ICTs will reproduce existing social injustices.

"Women and feminists engaged in the creation of knowledge must learn to wield ICTs to extend these networks and open up new spaces that will contribute to women's emancipation from patriarchy and other societal oppression. "⁴

The role of ICTs in the development of African women is clear. That access should not be skewed in favour of an elite, but must be made accessible to many.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) was a watershed in realising the power of information technology as a tool for women's mobilisation, information exchange, and empowerment. Since 1995, the 'gender and ICT' agenda has steadily gained legitimacy as a serious area of concern, mainly through careful work by women's organisations and a few international agencies and donors. These efforts have resulted in programmes and projects that are now contributing to empowering women in their individual capacities as well as organisational and community contexts, and are turning development initiatives in local contexts into more sustainable interventions.⁵

In Africa, except for countries with higher teledensity such as South Africa, Uganda and Senegal, intra-country communication between women who use ICTs is still severely restricted. Umbrella NGOs at national level can communicate with only a tiny fraction of their members, and regional NGOs are restricted to using their ICTs – largely limited to e-mail - for members in capital cities. For many, the World Wide Web is frustrating and inaccessible – often due to technical problems and costs of

⁴ Garcia, C. Weaving webs of unity: the experience of Asia and the Pacific in **Women's Information services and network - a global source book**. Royal Tropical Institute, The Netherlands. 1999

⁵ APC Women's Networking Support Programme Perspective, 2003.

access, but also to lack of training and knowledge. With respect to other media, women's access is less limited overall yet is still relatively more restricted than that for men, further limiting women's access to useful and relevant information.

A report on the state of the Internet in Africa notes that the rates of growth in Internet use observed in the 1990s has slowed down as the bulk of users with the financial resources to afford a computer and telephone have already obtained connections.

As of mid-2002, the number of dialup Internet subscribers was close to 1.7 million, 20 percent up from 2001. In Africa, the indicator of "number of users" is generally inadequate as an estimate of Internet users on the continent given that each computer with an Internet connection or email connection in the region usually supports a range of three to five users. This puts current estimates of the total number of African Internet users at around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside North and South Africa: this is about 1 user for every 250-400 people, compared to a world average of about one user for every 15 people, and a North American and European average of about one in every 2 people.⁶

Unsurprisingly, Africa women's Internet access and usage lag behind those of African men. In Uganda and Senegal, women Internet users only constitute about 31.5 percent and 12 percent of Internet users, respectively (0.1 percent of the total population in both cases), while in South Africa women users constitute 19 percent of Internet users (0.3 percent of the total population). In most parts of Africa, women users are part of a small, educated urban elite. There is much that still needs to be done to make ICTs accessible to women in rural Africa.

Low levels of education and illiteracy, reinforced by poverty, account in large measure for the problems African women face in accessing and using ICTs. About two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women, and a large percentage of illiterate women are on the African continent. The low ratios of girls in science and technology courses in Africa also reinforce the negative dynamics that limit women's access to decision-making positions in the fields of science and technology.

Globally, women's access to information is a major concern. The lack of access and democratic control over communication technology, the stereotyped portrayal of gender roles, and women's limited access to professional careers and to decision-making positions in traditionally male spheres all underscore the urgent need for African women to enter into the debate on the development potential and/or impact of ICTs, and to advocate a gender-aware approach. The domination of communication by a small powerful elite, mostly males, who use the existing communication technologies to coordinate and reinforce social/cultural dominance, is a very real threat for women.

⁶ *The African Internet - A Status Report*, <http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa/afstat.htm>

Gender has not been central to the many efforts to establish and institutionalise free and pluralistic media in African societies today. For most African women, the exercise of the fundamental freedoms of expression and information is doubly constrained by patriarchal laws and practice, and by economic and political conflicts whose impact is also gendered. The failure to understand these rights from a gendered perspective compounds the situation, and also poses gender based difficulties for female media practitioners.⁷

⁷ Plou, Dafne & Munuya, Alice 2003, *Is there a place for Women in the Information Society*, unpublished paper.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S ACCESS

For those women with the resources to access and use the new information and communication technologies, there are real benefits. For society as a whole, ICTs offer immense possibilities for reducing poverty, overcoming women's isolation, giving women a voice, improving governance and advancing gender equality. But this potential will only be realised if the factors that contribute to the current gender digital divide are recognised and addressed.

Women's access to ICTs is not a simple question of whether there is a computer connected to the Internet that women can use. Numerous other issues are just as important in determining whether women can access technology.

Literacy and Education

Illiteracy in Africa is a serious problem. The majority of illiterate people in Africa are women and of the total out-of-school children, 60% are girls. ICTs require various kinds of literacy and the inability to read and write is a major barrier to women's access to ICTs. Technological and scientific literacy are also a pre-requisite to using new technologies successfully.

<p>It has been estimates that two thirds of the world 870 million illiterate people are women, and the world's lowest literacy rates among women are found in thirteen African countries. In some African countries, literacy is less than 30 percent in local languages.</p>

Women face challenges in pursuing education at all ages due to lack of time to attend classes, family and domestic responsibilities, and socio-cultural practices that rate girls' education lower than boys. While the gender gap in primary and secondary school enrolment has begun to narrow in recent years, girls still represent 60 percent of the 100 million school age children in the developing world who grow up without access to basic education.

Literacy, language, computer skills and information literacy are critical skills for deriving some benefit from ICTs. Women and girls are less likely to have these requisite skills and therefore more likely to be excluded from benefiting from ICTs. Although the dominance of English on the Internet is slowly being eroded, (dominant languages are English, French, German, Japanese, and Chinese) women and girls are less likely to know the international languages used on the Internet. The predominance of women in rural areas in Africa means that they are also less likely than men to access computers, which are concentrated in urban settings. Information literacy is essentially the ability to evaluate different sets of information against each other, and apply it to real-life contexts. While software is being developed and used in ICT projects targeted at illiterate women, these initiatives

are pilot projects that occur few and far between, and are relatively expensive to implement.⁸

⁸ Hafkin, Nancy, 2002, "Gender Issues in ICT Policy in Developing Countries: An overview," paper delivered at the UNDAW 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, Korea, Nov 2002.

Language and Content

Language excludes many from the Internet. Although women are excluded for various factors including language, others excluded are non-English speaking nations, religious and ideological minorities, the poor and the majority of the world's children. White men located in the North largely decide the content of the Internet. They have the resources and the power to decide what is included and what is excluded on the Internet. This means that the content shared via ICTs lacks diversity, representation and is biased towards those who produce and upload the content. This makes the Internet an impoverished space. Projects have been implemented and creative ways are being put in place to draw diverse content into ICT spaces. But more energy and will and resources need to be galvanised to change the biased nature of the content of the Internet.

Women's viewpoints, knowledge, experiences and concerns are inadequately reflected on the Internet, particularly perspectives from women in developing nations. Gender stereotypes predominate and perpetuate those reflected in the print media. There is a need for women to develop, promote and publish their own perspectives and knowledge to ensure that they are represented on the Internet using their own voices.

Often women are not interested in using ICTs because the language and content does not speak to them, does not reflect their identities and does not teach, affirm or reinforce them.

Women's access to information is a major concern. The United Nations places lack of access to information as the third most important issue facing women globally, after poverty and violence against women. The lack of access and democratic control over communication technology, portrayal of women in reinforcing and/or changing stereotypes and women's limited access to professional careers and decision-making positions in traditionally male spheres, underscores the urgency for African women to enter into the debate on the developmental potential of ICTs in Africa.

Women's organisations in Africa with access to the Internet are often frustrated by the lack of indigenous content by and for women, and the large volumes of information from the North that often bears no relation to African women's realities. Thus, the challenge is to add to the "content" of the Internet by adding gender research and activism that speaks of local experiences.

Although language and content are large challenges to women's access and use, there are growing numbers of projects redressing this.

Indigenous Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights

A definition of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) says 'Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge that people in a given community have developed over time, and continue to develop. It is based on experience, often tested over centuries of use, adapted to local culture and environment, dynamic and changing.' The UNESCO Database on Best Practices on IK summarises IK as being locally bound, indigenous to a specific area, culture- and context-specific, non-formal knowledge, orally transmitted, and generally not documented, dynamic and adaptive, holistic in nature and closely related to survival and subsistence for many people worldwide.⁹

As mentioned earlier, the Internet is dominated by content, which is Northern and male dominated. The Internet values one kind of knowledge. In many rural and indigenous communities members create knowledge over long periods of time, drawing on their local experiences influenced by the natural, socio-economic, and human resources that constitute their local ecology. Such belongs to the community, and not to any particular individual in that community. If we were to take into account the inherent social differentiation, the value within IK is often dominated by the local knowledge of men, thus undervaluing or excluding women's knowledge and experiences.

Intellectual property rights (IPRs), however, are more often focused on protecting corporate and individual knowledge, and have left a variety of cultural products and forms of community knowledge open to exploitation. The critical issue for women in indigenous communities, as shown by the debate over IPRs, involves their control over, access to, and potential compensation for the knowledge they have acquired. The fact that most of their knowledge is considered "old" places it outside the scope of protection by industrial property laws. Under current international legal mechanisms, local and indigenous women's knowledge are at increasing risk of exploitation in the race for genetic resources (which in terms of plant-based herbal remedies, for example, has traditionally been the realm of women's knowledge) and the hunt for profit maximization.¹⁰

In the information or knowledge society, a new legal instrument is needed that would recognise and protect knowledge created, developed and enhanced by communities of people, and which acknowledges that men and women have differential access to the structures that shape knowledge systems. Such an instrument needs to be developed with the full participation of all parties who hold such knowledge, including men and women.

⁹ <http://www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm>

¹⁰ Appleton, Helen, Fernandez, Maria E., Hill, Catherine L. M. & Quiroz, Consuelo, 1995, "Claiming and using indigenous knowledge," in Gender Working Group, UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development, *Missing Links: Gender Equality in Science and Technology for Development*, pp 55-82.

Socio-cultural and Institutional barriers

Socio-cultural barriers refer to those factors that subtly or explicitly impel certain groups to censor their speech and behaviour, or exclude themselves from particular activities, in the belief that these are not intended for them. In terms of ICTs, these factors can range from ideas about the nature and role of technology and machines, to perceptions about the accessibility of the technology, to insecurities based on social markers of identity like gender, race, age, and so forth.

Generally, women have less access than men to ICT facilities where they exist. Numerous invisible barriers limit women's and girls' participation in the Information Society.

One of the more pervasive but intractable problems is "techno phobia," or fear of technology. Women often have complex relationships with technology and machines as a result of being socialised over time to believe that machines and technology are a man's domain and not for women and girls, thus generating a gender bias in attitudes towards studying or using information technology. Once girls do enter school, they are discouraged from studying science and technology, either consciously or unconsciously, by parents and teachers' biases. The steady attrition of girls and women throughout the formal science and technology system, from primary education to decision-making level, has been characterised as a "leaky pipeline".¹¹ In some countries in Africa and the Pacific, girls are encouraged to get married or get a job rather than pursue further education. In many of these countries, there is a social preference for boy children, and decisions to invest in boys' education are often made at the expense of girls who are required to help with domestic chores at home for all or part of the school day.

The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon means that fewer women enter into the science and technology fields, limiting the number of women science and technologists in academia, research and development, and at senior positions in the ICT arena. Gender biases against women in the cultures of university and research institutes also strongly influence the level of women's participation in university and research institutions. Women have greater difficulty finding employment in science and technology professions, receive fewer promotions, and have less access to supervisory positions.

The social factors that produce these gender differences operate in both institutional and informal settings. In some societies, cultural norms discourage interaction between women and men outside the family, and women may be uncomfortable in situations where men are present either as trainers or as peers. Even in countries where women and men mix freely, women who are learning to use computers – in particular older women – may be uneasy if a man is in charge of the training. An awareness of these socio-cultural and institutional barriers is

¹¹ Huyer, Sophia 2002. "The Leaky Pipeline: Gender Barriers in Science, Engineering and Technology." www.worldbank.org/gender/digitaldivide/g&dd.ppt

essential if decision-makers are to shape remedial programmes and design facilities that encourage women's participation.

Access, control, and effective use

Women's access to and control over ICTs is not equal to that of men. Here access refers to the ability to make use of the technology as well as the information and knowledge it provides, while control refers to the ability to decide how ICTs are used and who can have access to them. Effective use refers to the ability of women and girls to use ICTs strategically to advance social development goals.

There is a huge gap between women and men's access to telecommunications infrastructure. Infrastructure is largely concentrated in the urban areas, while the majority of women in the developing world, particularly in Africa, are located in remote and rural areas. Simply stated, if the technology is not there, women cannot have access to it.

The development of infrastructure includes many choices that involve decisions about locations of facilities, the nature and choice of technology, costs and pricing decisions. If these decisions on location, technology choice and costs do not explicitly consider providing access to women in remote and rural areas, but favour urban areas with high-end and expensive communication services and technologies, women will have less access than men.

"The most basic point is that the communications infrastructure in Africa is a gender issue. At present, a huge gender gap exists in access to communications. Infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas, and the bulk of women live in rural areas [...] If [technology/infrastructure choices] are made that have an urban bias and high cost, few women will have access. In building infrastructure, the starting point is policy. Thus, women advocates have to get involved in policy areas where they otherwise might not ... We need to ask constantly whether the infrastructure choices being made are ones that will benefit the majority of women. Universal access is a burning gender issue."¹²

The dimensions of this infrastructure divide stretch over international boundaries, and across developed and developing countries: one third of the world's population has yet to make a phone call, and less than one-fifth has experienced the Internet. These figures illustrate the lack of telecommunications service to largely poor and predominantly rural peoples in different countries, of whom a great number are women.

The ability of women to use information and knowledge is dependent on many factors, among which are literacy and education, geographic location (North or

¹² Interview with Nancy Hafkin, www.developmentgateway.org

South, rural or urban), and social class. Thus, as the information revolution develops and accelerates migration to the Internet, those without access will suffer greater exclusion.

There is a rising recognition that connectivity is not enough, and that the knowledge and resources to translate that access into effective use is equally important. Criticism has developed over ICT development programmes that concentrate excessively on access to technology and information sources in the mistaken belief that this will solve communities' development problems. The truth is rather that ICT initiatives will not be appropriated unless they also deliver information that is useful and relevant to the end-users, and where the end-users (women and men, girls and boys) have the capacity to act on it.

While ICTs can deliver potentially useful information, like market prices for women in small and micro-enterprises, for example, it is only one aspect of a longer chain of resources necessary to effect sustainable development. Where there is no access to roads, transport or credit, and other development inputs cannot be obtained (as is often the case for women), the access to and use of ICTs will be limited in its impact. It is therefore equally important to support the provision of ICT facilities by providing additional services and training that will also build men and women's capacities to act on their newfound information and knowledge.

The way in which ICTs are used in developing countries is also a gender issue. Research has shown that most women in developing countries make limited use of ICTs, restricting themselves to email and email discussion lists, generally for advocacy and networking purposes. ICT usage is affected by factors like cost, limited bandwidth, and technical skills. To date, very few African women have used ICTs for business development, entertainment, educational purposes, or for information relating to the quality of life of either themselves or their families (such as health and nutritional information).

Pornography, trafficking, violence against women, and censorship

The picture that emerges from most analyses of new information and communication content is of a masculinist rhetoric, and a set of representations which are frequently sexualised and often sexist. Pornography, e-mail harassment, "flaming" (abusive or obscene language), and cyber-stalking are well documented. It is estimated that 10 percent of sales via the Internet are of a sexual nature, whether in the form of books, video-clips, photographs, on-line interviews, or other items. New technical innovations facilitate the sexual exploitation of women and children because they enable people easily to buy, sell and exchange millions of images and videos of sexual exploitation of women and children. These technologies enable sexual predators to harm or exploit women and children efficiently, and anonymously. As a result of the huge market on the web for pornography and the competition among sites, pornographic images have become

rougher, more violent, and degrading.¹³ Affordable access to global communications technologies allows users to carry out these activities in the privacy of their homes.¹⁴

Even more disturbing is the use of the Internet as a tool in the prostitution and trafficking of women. In 1995 an estimated 1.8 million women and girls were victims of illegal trafficking, and the numbers are growing. The Internet is used in multiple ways to promote and engage in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of women. Pimps use the Internet to advertise prostitution tours to men from industrialized countries. The men then travel to poorer countries to meet and buy girls and women in prostitution.

There are numerous organisations working on the issues of women's trafficking and have done much to raise concern over the use of the Internet for trafficking women and children, and the explosion of pornography on the Internet. While recognising that traffickers and pornographers have moved their businesses to the Internet, women's organisations have also been aware of the dilemma of calling for government measures to curb this.

One of the fiercest debates in the area of Internet Rights regards the issue of freedom of expression and censorship. Some organisations have used the presence of pornography on the Internet to call for stricter policies for monitoring and censoring content on the Internet, including the development of software devices that would track down the creators and consumers of pornographic materials. Some women's organisations have been at the forefront of pointing out the danger of inviting censorship measures that could very easily be extended to other content areas, and limit freedom of expression far beyond the realms of pornography and trafficking. Legislation can be interpreted widely, leaving it open for states to decide what they would consider "illegal" or "harmful practices."

Above all else, women should be informed, made aware and included in the discussions and debates taking place around these trends, and consulted in the development of any policies and practices that are advocated by state agencies and other bodies.

In December 2002, UNESCO also co-hosted an international symposium on the theme of freedom of expression in the Information Society, where discussion focused on three issues: the new possibilities for freedom of expression generated by cyberspace; the obstacles limiting freedom of expression in cyberspace; and regulation of content in cyberspace. The participants concluded that:

We must resist the temptation to demonise the Internet. The offences committed on the Internet are not particularly original (apart from attacks by hackers); they reflect behaviours that are specific to social life, and which have already found carriers in

¹³ Rich, Frank, "Naked Capitalists," N.Y. Times Magazine, May 20, 2001.

¹⁴ Hughes, Donna M, 2002, "The use of new communications and information technologies for sexual exploitation of women and children," *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, Vol 13:1, http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/new_tech.pdf

the traditional media. Thus we need to look at the Internet as a tool for democracy, and not from the angle of its real or potential failings.¹⁵

Cost, time, and mobility

In many developing countries there is a limited supply of national and international connectivity, a situation shaped and compounded by a number of intersecting shortages: optical fibre may not be available, satellite links are limited and expensive, while internal telecommunication infrastructures are typically concentrated in few main cities and betray severe shortcomings in rural areas. In rural and remote areas, the combination of low population densities, poverty and geographical distance from established telecommunications networks and markets mean that there is little commercial incentive for undertaking the huge investments required to extend the technical infrastructure.

These technical challenges, together with telecommunications policies and regulations that promote state monopolies and limit competition, lead to highly priced services which severely hinder the ability of poor communities, and especially women, to access and appropriate these technologies.¹⁶

Equipment and connection costs are prohibitive for all but the wealthy in most developing countries. Monthly Internet access charges amount to 1.2 percent of average monthly income for the typical user in the USA, compared with 278 percent in Nepal, 191 percent in Bangladesh and 60 percent in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the 2001 figures for average costs for 20 hours of Internet access as a percentage of GDP per capita reveal huge disparities between more developed and less developed countries: whereas in Sweden the proportion is 0.12 percent, it is 81.07 percent for Bangladesh.¹⁷ Currently, the average total cost of using a local dialup Internet account for 20 hours a month in Africa is about \$60/month (telephone line rental costs excluded).¹⁸ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports costs for 20 hours of Internet access a month, in 2000, of \$22 including telephone charges in the United States. While costs in Europe were higher (\$33 in Germany, \$39 across the EU), these countries have per capita incomes that are at least ten times that of the African average.¹⁹

Practically all communications facilities cost money. Due to a range of intersecting factors, women are less likely to have money to buy televisions, radios, or to access them when they wish, particularly when the household technology is

¹⁵ UNESCO, 2002, *Freedom of Expression in the Information Society*. Final Report. International Symposium, organised by the French National Commission in partnership with UNESCO, <http://www.itu.int/wsis>

¹⁶ http://www.unictaskforce.org/groups/members/public.asp?cod_tema_menu=34

¹⁷ Kirkman, Geoffrey, (ed.), 2002, *The Global Information Technology Report 2001-2002. Readiness for the Networked World*. Oxford University Press, www.cid.harvard.edu/cr/pdf/gitrr2002_data.pdf

¹⁸ But ISP subscription charges vary greatly - between \$10 and \$80 a month, largely reflecting the different levels of maturity of the markets, the varying tariff policies of the telecom operators, the different regulations on private wireless data services, and access to international telecommunications bandwidth.

¹⁹ <http://www3.sn.apc.org/africa/afstat.htm>

controlled by someone else (typically a husband or father). Women are also less likely to have the disposable income needed to pay for information services, especially when other needs (food, education, etc) have higher priority.

Furthermore, women have less time available to seek out ICT connections or spend time online than men, as suggested by the findings of time use surveys conducted in a number of countries, which showed that women use ICTs for communication (mainly email) and electronic banking, while men spend time browsing the Internet, downloading software, and reading newspapers. Women's greater family and nurturing responsibilities mean that they usually have less time, and less choice, when it comes to spending their money. Even community access, often seen as the key to Internet diffusion in the developing world, may be outside the financial reach of many women. Nor can it be assumed that women will have access through associations or NGOs. In most cases where women in developing country contexts have access, they are typically part of a highly educated group of professional elite women who access ICTs through corporate networks.

For almost all women, time is in short supply. They are less likely than men to have the leisure to use ICTs – whether at home, work, or in public Internet centres. This problem is particularly acute for poor women in developing countries, but it is also a phenomenon in more affluent societies, and has important implications for the kind of content that women are likely to perceive as useful and worthwhile.

As most facilities in rural areas are shared public access, women's ICT access will be further inhibited when the operating hours of community access facilities do not take account of women's time use and target them for ICT access, and/or when facilities are located in settings and institutions that women are unable or unlikely to frequent. Operators of public access facilities need to accommodate women's schedules and adapt their own schedules to ensure gender equality in access to and use of ICTs.

In most countries, women's mobility is much more restricted than that of men. This may be the result of social customs that forbid women to travel unaccompanied, or because of family and caring responsibilities that make it difficult for women to move far from home, or the effect of unaffordable public and/or private transport in the context of women's limited earnings (compared to that of men in similar socio-economic levels). This lack of mobility is fundamental given the absence of connectivity in rural areas, where women account for up to 70 percent of the population.

Gender segregation in employment

Telecommunications and teleworking are opening up many new opportunities for employment of women, especially in the service industries. Patterns of gender segregation, however, are already being reproduced in employment within this comparatively young sector. Stereotyped views of women's

skills and abilities have made them preferred employees for certain kinds of work, particularly in banking, telecommunications industries, and insurance. Men are more likely to be found in the high-paying, creative work of software development or Internet start-ups, whereas employees in single-tasked ICT jobs, such as cashiers or data-entry workers, are predominantly female and low-paid. Countries where women have made inroads into skilled jobs as software programmers or computer analysts include Brazil, India and Malaysia, where national policies have promoted science and technology education for all. But many of these women are from privileged backgrounds, and the numbers remain relatively low.

The standardisation and miniaturisation of telecommunications components have spurred the physical separation of components design (taking place in the North) from components manufacturing (located mainly in the South). Thus large factories have been able to decentralise their manufacturing operations to take advantage of cheaper labour in developing countries. Similarly, service industries have been able to take advantage of developments in telecommunications by relocating low-skill, often repetitive jobs (such as invoicing, payroll administration, routine accounting) away from headquarters to low cost locations - a phenomenon that has become known as "teleworking" or "distant working". Many of these operations are located in Free Trade Zones in developing countries, where they benefit from a range of concessions (or incentives to move there) conferred by governments. In many Free Trade Zones, such as Jamaica and Barbados, workers are denied the rights to organise.

ICT developments also reproduce gender inequalities present in the broader fabric of society. Teleworking – work done from home or at a site that is separated from the central office – is sometimes promoted as being convenient for women with child-care and household responsibilities. The danger is that women must combine simultaneously two jobs – the professional and the domestic. Surveys have shown that women in Malaysia and India are reluctant to opt for home-based work, even when it is skilled. Teleworking, especially when conducted at home, tends to reinforce the historical gender division of labour.

On average, women are paid 30 to 40 percent less than men for comparable work. In its employment report released in January 2001, the ILO reveals a "digital gender gap" with women under-represented in new technology employment in both developed and developing countries. The ILO report also finds that patterns of gender segregation are being reproduced in the information economy. The report adds:

Although pay inequality exists between those who have ICT skills and those who do not, pay polarization also exists within ICT use itself. This polarization is often gender-based.

ICT Policy and Governance

Global and national ICT policy can either foster full participation in the information society, or inhibit people's access to technology, information and knowledge. Many countries are implementing programmes to attend to these issues, but concerns remain over the inclusion of remote and marginalized groups, especially women. These concerns are particularly acute for developing countries.

In most developing countries, women are predominantly located in rural areas that have poor infrastructure. The poverty of rural residents makes these areas less lucrative for private telecommunications operators seeking to maximise profits by offering more sophisticated, high-end telecommunications services. Little investment is therefore directed to the expansion of basic telephony, let alone public ICT access infrastructure, that would link women and others in remote and rural areas to information resources and populations in urban areas, thus reinforcing their isolation and silence.

ICT policy and regulatory frameworks keep tight control over telecommunications services in some developing countries with the result that use of ICTs is negatively affected. This is particularly true where policies and regulations limit the implementation of valued-added services that could bring down the cost of telecommunications services, like voice-over IP and wireless connectivity. The desire to maintain state telecommunications monopolies means that competition is reduced, resulting in inflated costs for services that are unaffordable for the poor, most of whom are women.²⁰

Governments and telecommunications policy makers in developing countries need to consider how to introduce regulatory measures that will require themselves and private telecommunications operators to invest in rural connections in addition to those in more lucrative urban areas, and not just focus on money-spinning services. Service requirements can be attached to the licenses of private or state-run operators to ensure a minimum level of telecommunications development across the country. These can be in the form of rollout targets for public and private lines, along with conditions regarding the quality and speed of such services. Alternatively, the license-tendering process can incorporate rollout targets as a criterion for evaluating different bids. In such cases, telecommunications policy and government departments must explicitly state that women and other marginalized groups are included in the targets.

Without such explicit references to gender issues in ICT policy, the chances that women and girls will reap developmental benefits from the information age are slim. Experience so far has shown that even where policies have been gender-aware, women and girls' needs are likely to be neglected or ignored when it comes to policy implementation. Where governments have claimed that an overall gender policy is sufficient and that no specific mention of gender is required in ICT policy, the evidence so far suggest that "policy-making in technological fields often ignore

²⁰ Interview with Mercy Wambui, <http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/133831/sdm/docview?docid=346180>

the needs, requirements and aspirations of women unless gender analysis is [explicitly] included.”²¹

There is a large body of evidence showing that when women’s needs and aspirations have been included in policy and programmes, projects implemented within these frameworks have had greater success in meeting the needs of their target audiences and have proved more sustainable in the longer term. In social development sectors such as health, agriculture and rural development, projects that include gender analyses rarely fail. Yet gender analysis rarely extends to technology and information projects. A study of hundreds of development projects with substantial ICT components showed that more than 33 percent had a high awareness of gender issues, but that the gender sensitivity carried over to the ICT components in only about 10 percent of them.²²

The challenge of incorporating gender issues into ICT policy requires an advocacy campaign on two fronts: sensitising ICT policy-makers to gender issues, and sensitising gender advocates to ICT policy issues. It is imperative that both ICT policy makers and gender advocates understand the systems that are proposed in policies and the implications for access, content, affordability and so forth, for men and women in their particular countries. Women have to become knowledgeable about the technology as well as the policies if they are to advocate real access for all. Women activists must get beyond the myth that technology is a domain for predominantly male specialists, and tackle the complexities of ICT policy and technology.

Absence from decision-making structures

Although the number of women in jobs involving ICT expertise is constantly rising, the same is not necessarily true of women’s access to decision-making and control of these resources. Whether at the global or national level, women are under-represented in all ICT decision-making structures, including policy and regulatory institutions, ministries responsible for ICTs, and boards and senior management of private ICT companies. One problem is that at both the global and national levels, decision making in ICTs is generally treated as a purely technical area (typically for male experts), where civil society viewpoints are given little or no space, rather than as a political domain. Deregulation and privatisation of the telecommunications industry is also making decision-making in this sector less and less accountable to citizens and local communities, further compounding women’s exclusion from decision-making and control of resources.²³

²¹ Marcelle, Gillian, 2000, “Getting gender into African ICT Policy: A Strategic View,” in Eva Rathgeber and Edith Ofwona Adera (eds), *Gender and the Information Revolution in Africa*, Ottawa: IDRC, p39.

²² Hafkin, Nancy, 2002, *Gender issues in ICT Policy in Developing Countries: An Overview*. Paper delivered at the UN DAW Expert Group Meeting on Gender and ICTs, Seoul, November 2002, p.4

²³ Association for Progressive Communications Women’s Networking Support Programme (APC - WNNSP), 2002, *Gender and ICTs*, http://www.apcwomen.org/gem/Gender_ICTs/index.htm#power

The under-representation of women in senior decision-making and politically influential positions in the ICT sector worldwide is striking given that the sector is fairly new, and is expected to be less burdened by historical practices of gender discrimination. In spite of these expectations, in 2001 women held only 9 percent of senior management jobs and 9 percent of positions in the supervisory bodies of the telecommunications industry across 18 countries in Europe.²⁴ In the United States in 2001, women held 13 percent of top executive positions, and made up just 9 percent of board members of major telecommunications and e-companies.²⁵ In 2001 there were female ministers of communication or telecommunication in just three countries - Mali, South Africa and Colombia – and deputy ministers in six others: Angola, Belarus, Czech Republic, Ghana, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tanzania.²⁶ Of the 19 countries responding to questions about gender equality in the 1999 ITU Regulatory Survey, 12 had no women in their national telecommunications regulatory body.²⁷ Leading the way were Canada, Sweden and South Africa, which according to the survey was the only country with a specific policy to increase women's participation in the telecommunications field. Its 1996 Telecommunications Act includes provisions for the promotion of women's empowerment and advancement in all aspects of the telecommunications industry.

The reasons for women's slow progress up the ladder into decision-making positions can in part be explained by differences in experience and education between men and women in the sector. Women have also been slower to understand and grasp the organisational cultures that operate in the male-dominated sector, and which work to their disadvantage. Until a critical number of women reach senior management positions, it will be difficult to counter gender-based discriminatory practices effectively.²⁸

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS AND GOOD PRACTICE

Each issue in the gender divide has specific implications for policy, strategy, and action. Various initiatives already exist that help to point the way forward. Within the context of specific national and regional situations, all stakeholders have a role to play in developing relevant and appropriate approaches.

This section will highlight actions that can challenge the barriers and show how these can be employed by Civil Society Organisations to assist in the development of African women. It will profile case studies and good practice as examples.

²⁴ European Database on Women in Decision-making 2001. *Women in the Telecommunications Industry*. www.db-decision.de/index_E.htm

²⁵ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall 2001. *Progress or No Room at the Top? The Role of Women in Telecommunications, Broadcast, Cable and E-Companies*. Annenberg Public Policy Centre, University of Pennsylvania. www.appcpenn.org/internet/publicpolicy/progress-report.pdf

²⁶ Hafkin, Nancy & Taggart, Nancy 2001. *Gender, Information Technology and Developing Countries: An Analytical Study*. Washington, DC: AED/USAID.

²⁷ Marcelle, Gillian 2000. *Transforming Information & Communication for Gender Equity*. New York: UNDP.

²⁸ Mitter, Swasti, 1995, "Who benefits? Measuring the differential impact of new technologies", in Gender Working Group, UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development, *Missing Links: Gender Equality in Science and Technology for Development*, pp. 219-242.

Awareness raising, education, training and skills development

Gaining access to information and communication technologies will not, in itself, contribute to women's advancement and social development. Emphasis needs to be placed on promoting awareness of the organisational applications of ICTs – for instance, for research, networking, lobbying, and conferencing and to demonstrate the role that ICTs can play in advancing gender equality – through trade, agriculture, health, governance, education and so on.

One of the most critical areas in which Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can play a role in enabling women to utilise ICTs is awareness raising, education, training and skills development. From a young age, girls in are often taught that technology is a boy's domain and that girls do not have a natural aptitude for technology. Traditionally technology is seen to be the domain of men and boys. In Africa where more boys are privileged with education, it is especially important to encourage the use of ICTs by girls.

Providing the means and facilitating the use of technology in schools, current trends can be reversed. Promoting and encouraging girls entrance into technological fields at school will ensure that as they grow and choose careers, the world of technology will not be an unknown and daunting environment. Educating teachers about the value of promoting girls involvement in technologies is equally important.

Promoting the use of ICTs is not enough. There have to be practical and demonstrable benefits of using ICTs. Making women aware of the ways ICTs can enhance their lives and their activism will encourage a deeper engagement with new technologies. The focus has to be on what we can do with the tool of information technology to make people's lives better.

Training is one of the most important mechanisms for encouraging women to use information technology. The tools offered by new technologies are often seen as mystifying, the domain of men and beyond the reach of many African-based women. Training methodologies need to take into account the needs of women. This can range from organising the training at times that women can make themselves available or ensuring that the venues are safe and accessible. It can also mean women training women which has proved to be a powerful and effective way of encouraging women to engage with ICTs. Creating a user-friendly, safe learning environment without technical jargon has assisted in active and keen engagement with the training.

Training women who have a common sphere of activism (for example Violence against Women) creates a space where women feel freer to discuss their information needs, and harnessing the use of ICTs as a tool for information solutions. Linking training to outputs, which bare a tangible relationship to women's work will make a substantial difference to the long-term benefits of training. Ensuring that there is ongoing and easily accessible support post the training has proved to sustain and embed the benefits of training. Efforts to ensure the access

of women and girls to technical, vocational and scientific education have also been intensified.

Accessible and gender-friendly training materials written in plain language and presented in the home languages of women being trained are important.

Connectivity and Access

The advent of ICTs has expanded the gap in access to information and technology in the world.²⁹ Access depends on telecommunications infrastructure, availability of computers, language literacy, computer literacy and skills training. In order to challenge this gap, inclusion in the debates and development of resources is critical for all people, not only those in positions of privilege and structural authority. Although access to new technologies is increasingly more commonplace among NGOs working towards gender justice issues in Africa, it is far from universal. Distribution of access within Africa is highly skewed. Countries like South Africa and Senegal have good and relatively stable access. In practically every African country, rural areas are virtually excluded with the hub of connectivity usually always based in urban areas.

Universal access and access to information as a fundamental right for citizens are critically linked with efforts to spread the use of ICTs in Africa.

Even where planning for universal access has occurred (an example here is Senegal), gender disparities have not been taken into account. Governments should be held accountable around telecommunications provision, and civil society structures must be involved in policy debates that encourage acceleration of Africa's information infrastructure development. A key policy issue would be ensuring that information infrastructure is expanded to include rural areas. This is also a key policy issue for women's access to information, as most women in Africa live in rural areas.

Low levels of education and illiteracy, reinforced by poverty, prevent women from accessing and using ICTs. Given the demographic spread in Africa, most women live in under-served rural and peri-urban areas. If women's connectivity is to be increased, the emphasis needs to be on common use facilities that provide women with affordable information and communication services. Cost is one of the major impediments to women's access to new technologies. In order to increase women's use of ICTs, access to the technologies has to be made accessible and affordable. Projects such as the one initiated by Senegalese telephone company Sonatel in collaboration with their French equity partner Manobi, provided connectivity to rural women farmers through cellular phones with Web Access Protocol (WAP-enabled). Connectivity Africa, and IDRC project, provided personal digital assistants (PDAs) to the Kampala-based Healthnet and Satellife to improve the speed, accuracy and security of surveillance health data. Both these devices introduce an element of

²⁹ AIS-GWG (1999) Engendering ICT Policy: Guidelines for Action. Pg.2

mobility not found with computers, and are especially preferred by women agricultural producers.³⁰

Although there are some innovative women-run projects such as the telephone kiosks and telecentres in Cameroon and Senegal, gender considerations are seldom built into the design or evaluation of these centres. Research has shown that often these facilities are used more by men than women. In order to increase women's use of ICTs their needs to be campaigns directed specifically at increasing women's access to facilities. As mentioned before, taking into account the times when training is held, women-only and women-led classes and providing assistants to type e-mail messages dictated by illiterate users. Making men aware of the value of women's access to ICTs could assist in facilitating the increase in women's use of ICTs.

It is important to note, however, that it will never be sufficient merely to establish physical facilities, whether communications networks or computers (assuming there is electricity), without ensuring that these facilities will be utilized by its users to the greatest extent possible. Providing access to advanced information technology services specifically implies fostering widespread education and awareness of their availability, strong emphasis on the knowledge and skills necessary to use the services, and also the understanding of how such technologies can be applied to improve individual and community social and economic welfare.³¹

Policy interventions

"Policy must be accompanied by practice. It is no good just doing a gender edit of existing policies. It is no good for example, just to say there must be more women in institutions of science and technology. We have to set targets, implement them, monitor them."³²

Technology is not gender neutral and neither is the policy environment in which it is developed. Gender is rarely considered relevant. This creates the problem that policy decides access to resources, prioritises groups and without including gender, inequities are reinforced. Global, regional and national ICT governance and policy frameworks can either enable full participation in the information society or inhibit people's access to the technology, information and knowledge. Policy frameworks deal with everything from the development of national communications infrastructure, to the provision of government, health, education, employment and

³⁰ *Gender Issues in the Information Society. A Background paper in the context of preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society.* UNESCO 2003. by Natasha Primo. P 44

³¹ Jorge, Sonja Nunes. The Economics of ICT: Challenges and Practical strategies of ICT use for Women's Economic Empowerment. 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

³² Net Gains: African Women Take Stock of Information and Communication Technologies.

other information services, to broader societal issues such as freedom of expression, privacy and security. Every ICT policy dimension has implications for women and failure to take account of these will certainly lead to negative impacts for women in relation to the impacts for men³³.

There are some exceptions where governments are ensuring a gender balance in policy processes. In South Africa the 1996 Telecommunications Act includes gender-specific provisions in line with the South African Constitution, which enshrines the equality principle. The Gender Unit of the Department of Communications, Women'sNet, and the African Information Society Gender Working Group have all been active in organising women to participate in the development of policy in South Africa. Similarly, Guinea includes gender issues in its national ICT policy, and sees it as necessary for participatory, equitable human development. The Economic Commission for Africa, in its work to implement the African Information Society Initiative, emphasises the importance of including gender considerations in policy. This has been particularly effective in Rwanda, where women's organisations have been part of the ICT policy elaboration process from the outset.

Role-players outside the state sector are important actors in including communities in the policy-making process. In Africa, the Acacia initiative, established in 1997 by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to develop the potential of information and communications technologies for the empowerment of poor African communities, is a good example of a programme that systematically ensures the participation of women and representatives from other marginalized communities in policy-making processes. Acacia has proved from its work in Senegal, South Africa and Uganda that the participation of a wide range of interest groups improves the policy-making process.³⁴

An important CSO initiative that builds on these developments is the Association of Progressive Communications (APC) - an organisation with members from all regions of the world - piloted a course on ICT policy for non-governmental organisations in March 2003 with sponsorship from the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO). The aim of the course was to raise awareness among NGOs in the social development sectors of the importance of ICT issues for development, and the need for broad-based advocacy for development-oriented ICT policy. The course includes a module (one of eleven) on gender issues and ICT policy. The APC is planning to roll out the training to various regions to help build capacity in ICT policy analysis, and lobbies for transformation from a perspective of equity and democratic participation.

These cases illustrate an essential point about any serious commitment to engender ICT policy. It is not enough simply to add the word "gender" or "women" here and

³³ Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme – Gender and ICT Advocacy in the WSIS Process, August 2003.

³⁴ *Gender Issues in the Information Society. A Background paper in the context of preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society*. UNESCO 2003. by Natasha Primo

there in a policy or strategy that has been developed from a starting point which is essentially gender blind. The participation of women and individuals with expertise in gender issues is essential at all stages of the policy elaboration process, so that the gender dimensions of policy areas can be identified and addressed. Likewise, the collection of sex-disaggregated statistics and indicators are integral to policy frameworks that aim to track women's participation in the planning, production and use of ICTs, and are key to initiatives that want to learn from their experiences by following an action-learning dynamic.³⁵

Combining access with social empowerment for women

Many ICT projects have succeeded in combining access - for women who would not usually be targeted - with economic empowerment. This has gone some way in creating awareness of the relevance of ICTs beyond the simple acquisition of technical skills and towards improving employment and other income-generating opportunities. In Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, India, and various African countries, young women have either been given access to advanced training with a view to them becoming IT professionals, or have been introduced to the Internet as an avenue for marketing their crafts and handiwork, enabling them to build their income as a result.

In many cases this has had other spin-offs for local community development, especially in remote areas, where it has reduced the inclination of young women to move to large cities in search of work. In some cases training that helped young women develop more gender-aware attitudes and values, as well as encouragement to be more informed and active citizens accompanied ICT training. Together these technical and social skills prepare women and young girls to meet and overcome gender-based obstacles.

In Senegal, the Parente Conjointe project, a collaborative initiative involving UNIFEM (Dakar), Oxfam America, ENDA Third World, and the IDRC Acacia has sought to stimulate debate and awareness of joint parenting issues in Africa, as part of a project to promote ICTs for women's empowerment and gender equality. The partners ran an electronic forum to raise awareness of joint parenting rights in francophone Africa.³⁶ Similarly, the Development through Radio (DTR) project in Sierra Leone is an attempt to use ICT to set up a two-way flow of information between policy-makers and women's groups about the abuses suffered by women in the civil war. The project includes workshops that teach the basic DTR skills to participants, who are in turn expected to train others in the different war-affected communities in how to conduct and record group discussions that could provide content for radio development programmes. Furthermore, the training includes discussions around the right to speak out, and allows women and girls to share their experiences of the war. Thirty groups of women access policy-makers and the

³⁵ ICT Policy for Civil Society Training Pack <http://www.apc.org/english/capacity/policy/curriculum.shtml>

³⁶ See <http://www.famafrique.org/parenteconjointe/forum/summary.html>

broader development aid community through weekly broadcasts. The project coordinator serves as intermediary between the women and policy-makers, and obtains a response, aired on the same programme, from the relevant policy-makers.³⁷ The government of Uganda has also recently engaged in a partnership with UNIFEM and the UN ICT Task Force in launching the Digital Diaspora Initiative, to link African information technology entrepreneurs in the Diaspora with women's organisations and business associations in Africa, with a view to harnessing existing resources to tackle feminised poverty.

Through their project *Open Learning Communities for Gender Equality with the support of ICTs* in local communities in Mozambique and South Africa, UNESCO seeks to promote community building and learning for gender equity through critical ICT use and content development in areas of concern to the local communities, including malaria, HIV/Aids, youth unemployment, and so forth.

There is an increasing number of projects that specifically target women, and that combine access to information and training with efforts to empower marginalized women, often through the simple act of giving women a platform for voicing their concerns. There is a need to encourage information sharing about best practices that can be replicated, while attending to local issues and social dynamics in different places.

Content creation

To encourage women to use ICTs, the content available through ICTs should be relevant to their lives. Women's viewpoints, knowledge, experiences and concerns are inadequately reflected on the Internet, while gender stereotypes predominate. These concerns relate both to issues of sexism and the portrayal of women in media generally, as well as to the need for women to systematise and develop their own perspectives and knowledge, and to ensure that they are reflected in these spaces. If women are to make use of the Internet for education, advocacy or income-generation, more relevant content, pertaining to both substance and language, must be made available through both new and traditional technologies. New technologies such as computers and the Internet should not deflect attention and resources from technologies that have been around for longer such as radio, television, video and print.

The Internet is being used (and can be further exploited) to publish and distribute African women's writing and knowledge. However, the dominance of English as the medium of exchange and knowledge production on the Internet also excludes many African women and women's organisations. With English, three other major languages used in Africa, French, Portuguese and Arabic, are starkly absent from African content on the Internet.

³⁷ See <http://www.dtronline.org/prjects.html>

If women are to be able to utilise the Internet for education, advocacy or income-generation, there must be more relevant content. This is a matter of both substance and language. It is also important that the new technologies such as computer and Internet should not deflect attention from technologies that have been around for longer – radio, television and video and print.

In South Africa just 7 percent of the population can access the Internet, but 90 percent has radio. Here, the Women'sNet community radio project is based on appropriate technology use. It includes a web-based clearinghouse of radio content on women's issues, whose main features are a database of searchable audio features, clips and news, links to gender resources for "radio on the Internet", and a help section that includes information about how to get connected and where to get the right software.

The provision of relevant local language content, via affordable and easy to use technology that is accessible to an audience with few or no reading skills, is crucial if ICTs are to meet the needs of women in developing countries. A model of how this can be achieved comes from a recent collaboration between the International Women's Tribune Centre and the IDRC. The starting point was discussions with women living close to the community multipurpose telecentre at Nakaseke, Uganda, about their information needs. It quickly became clear that, as farmers and small businesswomen, they needed ideas to help them make more money. The women imagined a programme that was simple, did not require a keyboard, and spoke to them in their own language. The end product, "Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money", is packaged as a CD-ROM, and uses browser software, graphics and spoken text.

To facilitate more women's access and relevant use of ICTs there needs to be massive investment of time and other resources into content development at the local level, based on local information needs. The relevance of ICT initiatives also falls short where they focus on "plugging in" women and other marginalized groups into existing global information flow, without any attention to local knowledge systems and content. This flawed approach reinforces marginalized groups as consumers of the Internet and information, and concomitantly neglects the local knowledge that may be of more relevance to women and other marginalized groups. There should therefore be greater attention paid to recognising women and the poor as information producers, and providing relevant training in collecting, packaging and disseminating local knowledge, based on an understanding of local information needs, and that of women specifically. Such information may well be more useful for local communities in meeting their everyday challenges than "foreign" information available on the Internet.³⁸

Convergence of "old" and "new" technologies

³⁸ UNDP Evaluation Office 2001, "Information Communications for Development," in *Essentials: Synthesis of Lessons Learnt*, No. 5, www.gipiproject.org/practices/essentials5_web.pdf

Many women with access to ICTs act as bridges to unconnected groups in their communities by repackaging information they find online and sharing it through communication channels such as print, fax, telephone, radio, theatre etc. Women in the South, in particular, have been very active in this area. Likewise they repackage "offline" information into electronic formats to share widely with women online. Women play an important role in bridging the information gap for non-connected groups in their communities.

According to *The Global Information Technology Report 2002-2003*, it is estimated that, of the 816 million people in Africa, only:

- One in 4 have a radio
- One in 13 have a television
- One in 39 have a fixed line telephone
- One in 35 have a mobile telephone
- One in 130 have a personal computer
- One in 160 use the Internet and
- One in 400 have pay television.

The combination of old (such as radio) and new technologies are also useful in overcoming barriers and obstacles posed like illiteracy, affordability and physical access, while also appealing to oral-based cultures. Despite the upsurge of high technology communications, radio remains a vital tool of education and communication amongst communities in Africa, particularly those sectors that are lower-income and rural based.

By repackaging the paper-format of information for electronic distribution wider audiences can be reached. The reverse can also happen. Electronic information can be sourced by networks with access to the Internet and repacked in formats that are useful for target audiences. A partnership that brings together the paper-based information of NGOs and the power of radio also addresses problems of illiteracy. In South Africa alone, there are, for example, more radios than beds and school-going children per household. Making use of radio is therefore a powerful means of increasing information reach.

Many CSOs in Africa have computers with CD-Rom drives but erratic and unreliable access to the Internet. Compiling resources, including websites, on CD-Rom is a way of sharing information and circumventing unreliable Internet access.

CURRENT POLICY PROCESSES

From Beijing to the World Summit on the Information Society

The role of ICTs as a tool for development and social transformation has enjoyed sustained interest in the international arena, and especially in the United Nations.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 is generally regarded as a watershed in understanding of information technology as a powerful tool that women could use for mobilization, information exchange, and empowerment. The virtual community that developed around Beijing was the genesis of an international electronic network of women's organisations that still exists and continues to expand. Beijing was also the first international conference at which substantive issues relating to women, information and communication technology were debated, albeit somewhat on the margins of the core agenda. The 2000 review of the implementation of the BPFA acknowledged the increased opportunities afforded to women through the use of ICT – in knowledge sharing, networking and electronic commerce - but also noted that poverty, lack of access to telecommunications infrastructure, language barriers, computer non-literacy, and illiteracy, hamper women's use of ICT, including the Internet.

In the years since Beijing, international awareness has developed rapidly. Since 1995, women have taken their concerns directly to national governments and global telecommunications bodies. Women's participation in the regional and global preparations for the Beijing meeting also helped build a network of women concerned about gender and ICT issues and policies.

Global Knowledge 97 (GK97) was the first major international conference to explore the potential of information technologies and their possible impact on developing countries. An intense e-mail and institutional lobbying campaign, initiated by the Ad Hoc Committee for Women at GK97, resulted in substantial female participation and was an important step in putting women on the 'knowledge for development' agenda. At GK97, women participants were also instrumental in drawing up the *Canon on Gender, Partnerships and ICT Development*, which outlined some principles for development and design of ICTs that emphasized equal participation by women and men, and gender-aware assessments and evaluations of ICT use.

By the time of the second Global Knowledge conference (GKII, March 2000), the level of mobilisation around issues of gender, knowledge and information was such that a specific Women's Forum was held within the conference, leading to a comprehensive set of recommendations³⁹.

Other initiatives swiftly followed. Acting on a resolution adopted at the 1998 World Telecommunications Development Conference, a Task Force on Gender Issues (TFGI) was established within the Telecommunications Development Sector of the ITU (ITU-D). Its mandate was to work towards ensuring that the benefits of telecommunications and the emerging information society are made available to all women and men in developing countries on a fair and equitable basis. In July 2000 the ITU, UNDP and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate on developing gender-responsive approaches to telecommunications and ICT policy development.

³⁹ See Karl, Marilee (ed.) 2000. *Transcending the Gender Information Divide*.
www.globalknowledge.org/my/GKII_WomenForum_FinalReport.doc

In 2001 the United Nations Secretary General established a high-level Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force whose Plan of Action, adopted in November 2001, is clearly informed by gender analyses and perspectives. The objective of the Task Force is to “provide overall leadership to the United Nations role in helping to formulate strategies for the development of information and communication technologies and putting those technologies at the service of development and, on the basis of consultations with all stakeholders and Member States, forging a strategic partnership between the United Nations system, private industry and financing trusts and foundations, donors, programme countries and other relevant stakeholders in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions.”⁴⁰

In March 2002 the World Telecommunication Development Conference agreed on the establishment of a gender unit within the Telecommunication Development Sector (ITU-D), the mainstreaming of gender issues throughout the organisation’s work, and the conversion of its Task Force on Gender Issues into a permanent Working Group of the ITU-D. The Conference also urged the inclusion of a gender perspective in the themes and work of the World Summit on the Information Society.

In November 2002, the UN Division on the Advancement of Women (DAW) held an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on *Information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women*, in Seoul, Korea.⁴¹ Participants produced numerous examples of how marginalized women are using ICTs for their own empowerment, but noted that these examples are still sporadic and not widespread enough: in large part, the problem lies with the global lack of gender analysis in ICT policy and programme delivery. Furthermore, apart from the internal barriers felt by many women (fear of technology, lack of self-confidence, etc.) that restrict their use of ICTs, gender-specific structural barriers reinforce women’s lower usage of ICTs compared to men. These barriers include inequalities between men and women at decision-making levels that constrain women’s participation in shaping the role of ICTs as a development tool. Women’s marginalisation from ICTs may also mean that they will benefit less from the educational and employment opportunities that will become available through ICTs, as well as access to health systems and other social services, thus perpetuating and deepening existing gender inequalities.

Given the potential of ICTs in development and social transformation, it is essential that we address the gender digital divide. The aim is both to ensure women’s access to the benefits of ICTs, and to make ICTs into a central tool in women’s empowerment and the promotion of gender equality.

⁴⁰ <http://www.unictaskforce.org/about/principle.asp>

⁴¹ The results of the UNDAW EGM will be fed into the 2003 Commission on the Status of Women discussions to shape their multiyear work plan for 2002-2006, and will inform the UNDAW submission for the WSIS 2003 and 2005.

Building a gender-aware information society: WSIS and Beyond

There is increasing recognition that gender advocacy has a legitimate presence within the ICT debate, though there is still an ingrained tendency to regard it as something separate from the core issues. Given what is at stake in the development and deployment of ICTs, it is imperative that gender be incorporated into mainstream “core” discussions and decisions at national, regional and international levels.

Initiatives have sprung up among civil society groups to campaign for the inclusion of a gender perspective and women’s rights in the deliberations of delegates as they develop a vision for the Information Society and start the task of exploring issues of access and applications.

At the first regional preparatory meeting of the WSIS process, held in Bamako, Mali, in July 2002, a group of about 12 organisations who attended the Regional Preparatory meeting responded to an invitation by UNIFEM to contribute to ensuring that gender dimensions are included in the process of defining and creating the Global Information Society. The caucus is multi-stakeholder, including women from government, private telecommunications services providers, and women located in UN agencies, as well as women in non-governmental organisations and other civil society bodies. These organisations came together as the founders of what is set to become a global WSIS gender caucus, intent on advocating for the inclusion of gender concerns during the preparatory processes and WSIS summits, as well as in the outputs of these processes. The WSIS gender caucus produced a statement at the Bamako Regional Preparatory Meeting in which they urged African states “to ensure better balance in ICT uses while instituting specific programmes that address the needs of women, particularly those aimed at rural and disenfranchised areas.” The group also made several recommendations that entreated African governments and all relevant stakeholders to ensure they build measures for African women’s advancement into their policies and action plans.

At the first WSIS Preparatory Conference held in Geneva in July 2002, a group of women’s non-governmental organisations active in gender and the ICT field argued for the need for a separate but parallel gender caucus to make sure the particular concerns of the gender and ICT activists located in NGOs are well represented, both within the multi-stakeholder gender caucus and the broader WSIS civil society structure caucus.

This group, the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group, developed the “7 Musts: Priority Issues for Gender Equality in the WSIS Process,”⁴² at the second WSIS Preparatory Conferences held during February 2003. The “musts” set out some

⁴² See <http://www.genderit.org>

broad principles that should underpin the WSIS deliberations if they are to include women and their gender concerns successfully.⁴³

The complexities of creating digital opportunities within a gender-centred conceptual framework are formidable. They call for multi-level initiatives and sometimes require difficult policy choices. Strenuous efforts will be needed to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the WSIS to bridge the gender divide already apparent within the emerging information society. To help achieve this, it is necessary to pursue the broadest possible participation of decision-makers, professional communities, representatives of civil society, bilateral and multilateral partners, and the private sector.

A cursory analysis of the language of the submissions made by different country delegations, with the exception of a strong statement on the need to include women and men by the government of Canada, show that there is scant recognition of the need to include gender concerns explicitly into either the Declaration of Principles or the Action Plan. United Nations agencies like UNESCO and UNCTAD, for example, have also included statements urging the need for a gender perspective in the Vision and Principles for the Information Society and the Action Plan that ensues from that document.⁴⁴ It appears therefore that a need remains for vigorous advocacy before sympathetic governments and international organisations for inclusion of a gender perspective in the WSIS deliberations and the reports that result from the summit.

The latest version of the Draft Declaration of Principles,⁴⁵ in which all the text is in square brackets and hence subject to discussion and negotiation at the WSIS Intercessional Meeting in Paris (July 2003), does include statements about the need to use ICTs to advance the Millennium Development Goals, including improving the status of women (Para 11), addressing power differentials that shape men and women's status and constrain women's access to and participation in the Information Society (Para 15), and the need to address barriers that shape women's access to information and knowledge (Para 25). A gender perspective, however, needs to be built into all aspects of, and actions towards, the construction of the Information Society, by all stakeholders (governments, private enterprises, NGOs and civil society organisations, and international organisations). Specifically, it is vital to refer back to the imperative to involve women at all levels, on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including accessing power and participation in decision-making, in order that equality, development and peace may be achieved in the Information Society.⁴⁶

⁴³ <http://www.genderit.org/CSW/musthaves.htm>

⁴⁴ Notes developed by Karen Banks (of APC Women's networking Support Programme) and shared via email communication.

⁴⁵ See http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsispcip/td/030721/S03-WSISPCIP-030721-TD-GEN-0001!MSW-E.doc (version dated 21 March 2003)

⁴⁶ See Art. 16, Beijing Declaration, BPFA.

In turn, the latest version of the WSIS Draft Action Plan,⁴⁷ for which all text is also in square brackets, sets out the need for a “flexible” Plan that would be used as a reference framework and a guide to governments and other stakeholders who find themselves at different levels of development. While this is probably a pragmatic approach, it does allow regions and governments to select those aspects that they favour, to the potential postponement and neglect of others that they do not agree with or are considered too costly to implement. Currently, there is little to no mention of the need to target women and gender imbalances in the Action Plan. A flexible Action Plan reinforces the need for strong gender statements to be incorporated throughout the Declaration of Principles.

EXAMPLES OF AFRICAN PROCESSES

*UNIFEM's Digital Diaspora Initiative*⁴⁸

To respond to and help bridge the growing digital divide that particularly affects women, African IT executives from the Diaspora who are successfully running IT companies abroad, government representatives, civil society organizations and UN system representatives held a conference in Kampala, Uganda, to adopt a Declaration outlining specific ways to support African women in the use of information technologies. Participants attending the Digital Diaspora Initiative were brought together by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in collaboration with its UN partners. The meeting held in May 2003 launched the Digital Diaspora Initiative and was hosted by the Government of Uganda. Representatives from the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), as well as from eight African governments were among the meeting's participants, signalled a clear commitment to prioritising ICT on Africa's development agenda.

Participants committed to an inclusive and synergistic approach to ICT-related training, employment, entrepreneurship and market access. The Declaration called for the creation of an enabling ICT environment for women to be achieved through actions such as improved market access and infrastructure development; enhanced government policies and initiatives and strategic partnerships between governments, the private sector, the UN system and civil society. Involvement of the Diaspora in ICT policy making at the national and international level was seen as strategic step in harnessing skills from the Diaspora. The meeting called for the formation of a Consortium of Diaspora teams to provide assistance in nine pilot countries - Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Uganda and to develop a portfolio of women and ICT projects for potential financing by the Diaspora and other partners.

⁴⁷ See http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/md/03/wsispcip/td/030721/S03-WSISPCIP-030721-TD-GEN-0002!!!MSW-E.doc (version dated 21 March)

⁴⁸ http://www.unifem.org/pressreleases.php?f_page_pid=6&f_pritem_pid=4

New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is a new programme of action that seeks to undertake the task of developing infrastructure necessary for development and to improve social conditions and deliver a range of social services. This plan is expected to aid the reversal of Africa's economic situation and put it on a proper path for economic growth and development.

The overemphasis on "African ownership" of NEPAD is very much in line with a shift in World Bank and IMF thinking that has belatedly recognised that a failure of most of their projects in Africa and the developing countries was partially due to lack of genuine ownership by the countries concerned. The new thinking therefore goes, for any project to succeed African countries must be seen to "own" it with outsiders only playing a supportive role.

The NEPAD plan, in line with typical neo-liberal policy making, enables the private sector to play a pivotal role in the development strategy of the NEPAD, based on the assumption that growth will automatically lead to development. No consideration is given to the fact that by so doing, the plan supports a framework within which the criteria for economic policy making are financial rather than social, and short term rather than long term. More linkages need to be made between the different sectors in NEPAD. For example, tackling issues of performance would need upgrading the human capital through skills development, education, adequate nutrition, health care, etc.

NEPAD and gender

The plan excludes the informal sector where the major part of women's economic activity is located. In addition, measures to promote the development of the private sector in Africa include mainly policies directed at large-scale industries and has ignored the small-scale production in which a majority of women is engaged.

There is some recognition of the need to address women's needs and existing gender gaps in the region's development through the implementation of the NEPAD. Despite the recognition of the need to address African women's needs, there is only a limited recognition of the systemic barriers and discrimination faced by African women in every sector addressed by the NEPAD. Emphasis is placed on the need for self-development and self-improvement rather than on the need for African states to remove these systemic barriers and address systemic discrimination⁴⁹. NEPAD's expression of gender goals is very vague and lacking. "There is an overall 'long term objective' to 'promote the role of women in all activities', which is vague to the point of meaninglessness.

Moreover, NEPAD perceives women as passive, in need of income-generating activities, training; education and credit, with no recognition of their actual participation in the economic life of their countries through their unpaid and uncounted work in production and reproduction. This implies that their participation in the political and economic life of African countries is not envisioned as an

⁴⁹ Assessment of the gender orientation of NEPAD Prepared for presentation at the African Forum for Envisioning Africa held in Nairobi, Kenya, 26 - 29 April 2002; Sara Longwe

obligation to ensure the realization of their basic capabilities and rights, but mainly as a means to improve the overall efficiency of development plans and programmes.

There is no mention of women or gender issues in the initiatives and sectors of the plan that are absolutely critical to addressing women's poverty and promoting their empowerment. An example of such omissions is the section of the NEPAD on ICTs. The crucial contribution of women in the analysis of the issues and subsequently, in the actions to address these is lacking.

In general, the NEPAD plan is characterised by an instrumental approach to gender issues and a lack of conceptualisation of gender equity and equality. NEPAD is guilty of the "add women and stir" characteristic with many other development plans⁵⁰.

NEPAD and ICTs

The NEPAD document stresses the importance of information and communications technologies (ICTs) as they relate to a range of sectors, including education, health, democratisation, and indigenous knowledge. Benefits of all kinds are expected based on the conduct of government operations, on transparency in governance and citizen participation and on cultural expression and cultural exchange. Achieving E-readiness and effective use of information communication technology as a tool for social and economic development are key elements in the NEPAD process.

Within this context an E-African commission was set up to deal with issues related to ICTs. The E- African Commission is the NEPAD ICT task team and has been mandated to formulate a broad ICT strategy and action plan for NEPAD that will cover policy/legal/regulatory and infrastructure matters. Its key objectives are to accelerate the development of African connectivity and promote conditions for Africa to be an equal and active participant in the global information society. The E-African commission was formally granted this status in September 2002 during NEPAD's 14th meeting. Within the E-African commission there is also An Information Society Partnership for Africa's Development (ISPAD) intended to be a mechanism through which the private sector and other actors can engage in the work of the E-commission and the NEPAD ICT process as a whole.

The E-commission also serves as the principle advisory body to the NEPAD heads of states and government implementation committee on ICT matters. It is meant to develop a NEPAD strategy and action plan for accelerated development of ICT infrastructure applications, content and services to meet Africa's development needs. It is also meant to promote the use of ICTs in support of NEPAD's programmes.

The E-commission's priorities include:

⁵⁰ The NEPAD, Gender and the poverty trap-The NEPAD and challenges for financing for development in Africa from a gender perspective, Zo Randriamaro, KAIROS Africa www.web.ca/~iccaf

- Ensuring that all African countries are connected to a broadband fiber optic cable system that would link within Africa as well as the rest of the world. As well as the provision of thin route satellite access
- E-school project, to improve and accelerate the provision of education in Africa (radio, computers, televisions, etc). It is envisaged that every E-school will also have a health point, thus contributing to NEPAD's health project
- In terms of E-policies and strategies, the E-African commission proposes conducting an E-readiness study to guide the development of e-strategies

NEPAD and gender and ICT

Despite the positive statements on ICTs in particular and gender in general, NEPAD does not specifically address the central ICT gender issues. It does not pay attention to the major trends of the information economy. In particular, it seems to ignore women's right in the information society and the development of appropriate technology for the development of African women. Indeed during the world summit on the information society held in Geneva in December 2003, President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal once again placed emphasize on the need for African women to self-development and improvement, even in the ICT sector. "Women can contribute more to decision-making if they are at the top, where they can influence the progress of other women and of society. The fate of women must not be left up to men — that would be a tremendous mistake. That would be unilateral, and I can tell you that things will go much better if we leave it to women to close the gap between men and themselves" ⁵¹

Thus, the ample evidence of the regressive gender redistributive effect of social policy constraints imposed by globalisation has not been taken into account. Subsequently, the actions planned in the ICT sector do not specifically address this regressive effect. With regards to the issue of women's access to and control over ICT resources, strategies and actions, the NEPAD should build on the recognition that women's advancement in the ICT sector and their access are influenced by a variety of factors within the political economy of different countries and the general policy environment, as well as by institutional constraints and social relations of power which determine their access to and control over all other basic resources at household, community, national and international levels.

The actions planned to expand women's access to and control over ICT resources should therefore not be limited to income-generating activities, education, and training. These actions should focus on the legal, economic, socio-cultural, and political constraints that perpetuate gender inequalities – constraints that have been thoroughly analysed and documented by a numerous studies undertaken by various stakeholders, including women themselves.

NEPAD needs to recognise that "women are being hemmed in by various forces of fundamentalism: the fundamentalism of the market, religious, as well as cultural. NEPAD should focus on the establishment of a new social contract based on new alliances in particular women and their organisations, thereby fulfilling their rights to participate in decisions about policies that shape their lives, and recognising their unique power to effect change towards people-cantered, equitable and sustainable development.

In order to ensure poverty eradication and to promote gender equality, the NEPAD plan should envision a major paradigmatic shift from the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy to a development model that builds on a broad-based dialogue – inclusive of women, the poor, racially and other marginalized groups – between different interests about alternative economic policies and their social content.

⁵¹ Interview conducted by IDRC during the WSIS in Geneva, December 2003. http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-51491-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Recommendations made by the gender focus group (gender and NEPAD)

Revise all chapters of the document and conduct a gender analysis of the entire framework and systematically integrate all gender concerns of direct relevance to the continent's economic and social development. The plan should make explicit commitments, including resource commitments, to using NEPAD as a tool for mainstreaming gender in all sectors and strategies, and for narrowing gender-based gaps in each sector. A gender analysis should also expose the factors that impinge on women's potential in all areas and at the personal level.

1. The NEPAD framework should include a gender component that focuses on the following strategic areas at regional, sub-regional and national levels:
 - (a) Regional frameworks should be instituted for developing and applying gender impacts indicators to facilitate regular assessment of the progress made on the empowerment of women in Africa to enhance their contribution to economic and social development.
 - (b) To ensure availability of adequate financial resources, as well as strong human and institutional capacities to implement gender policies at regional, sub-regional and national levels.
 - (c) In order to achieve the International Development Target to reduce poverty by half, by the year 2015 in Africa, it is imperative that the concerns of women representing over 50% of the continent's human resources are fully integrated in national plans, programs and budgets⁵².
2. The NEPAD plan should commit to ensuring equal access to quality education by girls and boys and the participation by women in governance and decision-making at different levels. Including the creation of a conducive environment for participation of African women in the NEPAD initiative. This will require both political will and the commitment of resources to reverse the significant gender inequalities in Africa.
3. Establish a policy, legal and justice system that effectively guarantees and protects the right of women to access, manage and control information and economic resources, and protects them from gender-based violence in the family and community; including a political will by the state and communities to give up negative aspects of culture, and its misuse by many, in favour of development.
4. Access to information including the right to equality should be recognised as a critical factor for sustainable development and should form an integral part of the development of the NEPAD plan.
5. Creation of entry points for African women's participation in macro and micro economic activities as well as the formulation of policies.

⁵² <http://www.uneca.org/adfiii/docs.htm>, African Development Forum Documents

6. The challenge for NEPAD is to see ICTs as an increasingly important tool for development and fast track appropriate gender-sensitive and population-wide policies and programmes. Resources must be found for Africa to create its own knowledge, and information in languages and formats that are more accessible to its people. Again women must be part of the ICT policy dialogue, design, and marketing.

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA)

UNECA began activities in gender and ICT in 1998 in collaboration with IDRC, with the track on gender and ICT at the ECA 40th Anniversary conference on women and economic empowerment. The ECA/Cisco Networking Academy for African Women, started in 2001, awarded scholarships for young women throughout Africa for training in Internet networking technology, leading to certification as a networking associate or professional, and training in gender issues and management.

The 1998 conference was entitled "**African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future**". One of the four conference themes was **African women and the information age: a new window of opportunity**.⁵³ The ECA Conference of Ministers responsible for Planning adopted the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) in 1996, as an action framework to build Africa's information and communications infrastructure, maximise opportunities for harnessing information for Africa's development, and to expedite the information revolution in Africa. Through the Initiative, measures will be taken to ensure that gender sensitive information services are a major focus of national attention and action, with appropriate international support. This Conference is interested in a series of questions about African women and the information Initiative: How can women ensure their full participation in, and benefit from the AISI? What policies are needed to include a gender perspective on these new technologies? In what ways can these new tools help African women in key sectors such as agriculture and health? How can these new information technologies promote and facilitate dialogue and partnership around African women's priority concerns? How can we prepare the new generations so those young women use these new tools as easily as young men do? How are these tools in themselves agents of democratisation, facilitating the full participation of African women in economic development?

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA) Africa Information Society Initiative (AISI)

The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) is an action framework that has been the basis for information and communication activities in Africa for the last six to seven years. AISI is not about technology. It is about giving Africans the means

⁵³http://www.uneca.org/eca_resources/Major_ECA_Websites/eca40th/overview.htm#working

to improve the quality of their lives and fight against poverty. By the year 2010, AISI is intended to realize a sustainable information society in Africa.⁵⁴

AISI identifies itself as "Africa's digital agenda". It is an action framework to build Africa's ICT infrastructure. AISI is coordinated by the UNECA and is supported and implemented through partnership with multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental partners, as well as representatives of the private sector and African member States. It aims to give Africans the means to improve the quality of their lives and fight against poverty. Launched in 1996, it sees Africa as needing a common vision for its quest to bridge the digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world and to create effective digital opportunities to be developed by Africans and their partners. The partnership seeks to speed the continent's entry into the information and knowledge global economy.

One of the areas (among others) identified as both a challenge and an opportunity is Gender and development. The main challenges identified are

- Gender equity: women constitute 50 per cent of the population but do 60 per cent of work, earn one-tenth of the income and own 1/100 of the assets;
- Women generally have more limited access than men to technology in general, to information, the media and communication facilities;
- Lack of readily available information on women in society, culture and economy.

And the opportunities include:

- Improve the rights of women through access to information and indicators which may be used for tracking gender issues and elimination of stereotypes;
- Ensure the equitable access of women to information, technology and technological education.
- Enhance the role of modern communications media to promote awareness of equality between women and men.

The major areas of focus of AISI as part of Africa's development agenda are:

Promoting sectoral applications of ICT for eradicating poverty and improving quality of life. The ADF strategy called for commitment from the highest levels of leadership to applying ICTs to Africa's pressing social and economic problems including:

- Applications to support the educational process and meet the needs of Africa's youth

⁵⁴ <http://www.uneca.org/aisi/>

- Applications in support of the delivery of health care, opportunities for business and trade
- Electronic Government, and
- Creating the enabling policy environment.

Conclusions

ICTs offer immense possibilities for reducing poverty; improving governance and advancing gender equality in Africa - provided they are made more accessible and consciously applied towards the achievement of these objectives.

In order to support, broaden and include more women in these electronic webs, there is much work to be done. We need to educate and train more women in order to challenge the often deeply entrenched techno phobia nurtured from an early age. ICT policy intervention is critical in order to include a gender perspective in all discussions related to ICT policy. By lobbying the various industries (which include government regulatory structures, telecommunications industries, hardware and software manufacturers, etc.) and advocating policies which would allow for democratic policies which redress previous imbalances in provision, we will go some way to increasing access to a larger grouping of people, in particular women and girls.

Despite the imbalance in access and provision for women, women are creating local content, creating space for their own voices, promoting their own knowledges and beginning to "redirect" the North to South information flow. Participatory methodologies and women training women have created safe and nurturing environments where women can engage with the technologies rather than the prejudices and exclusionary environments often created in mixed learning spaces.

African women, and women in the South are proactively facilitating ICT access for women and doing so in ways that assert women's voices and insert gender-specific issues into public debate. Women are ensuring that ICTs are used to address directly women's socio-economic conditions. There is an increased awareness that women's organisations should combine new and older ICTs for effective information sharing and dissemination to strengthen global lobbying and advocacy for gender justice and to ensure greater inclusion of developing nations.

Many gains have been made in African women's access to and use of ICTs but many challenges remain. One of the most critical areas, which demands coordinated efforts, is in the policy arena. Lobbying, advocating and campaigning for the inclusion of gender targets in the final WSIS Declaration is of critical importance. This will enable a global framework that could assist in pressurising national governments to address the marginal location of women in ICTs. It would highlight the need to build infrastructure to promote deeper engagement with the information society and would facilitate wider access, particularly in relation to language diversity and literacy issues, as well as relevant local content

Women need to ensure that ICTs don't "make us an object of information, never a subject of communication."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Foucault (1979 p200) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, New York. Translated by Alan Sheridan.

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