Noontime dialog during PrepCom 1 for WSIS

Debate on the opportunities and obstacles
for women and men in the digital revolution

2 July 2002
ITU Tower Building, Room B

Moderator: Dominique Bourne (ITU/ Telecom)
Rapporteur: Diana Mercorios – ABANTU for Development

Panelists – respondents
Joanne Sandler (UNIFEM)
Karen Banks (APC/WNSP)
Willy Jensen (Norway)
Sabine Meitzel (ITC)
Walda Roseman(Compass Rose)
Conchita Poncini (IFUW)
Lydall Shope-Mafole (South Africa)
Doreen Conrad (ITC)
Gillian Marcelle (WSIS – Gender Caucus)
Anne Walker (IWTC)

Panelists – questioners
Susan Teltcher (UNCTAD)
Ewa Ruminska-Zimny (ECE)
C. Brautigam (UN/DAW)
Pat Faccin (ITU-D/WGGI)
Claire Harasty (ILO)
Hélène Cholette-Lacasse (Canada)
Natalie Domeisen (ITC)
Gary Fowlie (ITU)

Introductions
The facilitator gave thanks to all those involved in assisting to put together the meeting – the ITU Group on Gender Issues and the Radiocommunication Bureau.

The panelists introduced themselves and the work that they do.

Questions and answers

1. Is there a gender divide within the Digital Divide? What are the manifestations of this divide?

JS:
There is a gender divide in the digital divide because there is no women's input or perspective in the development of ICTs. Men are the ones who determine the policy, the use and the future potential of these technologies. Therefore, in many countries women and girls have less access to ICTs than men. However, in some countries there is more parity. It is therefore important to look at what is happening in these countries to find out what factors have led to or created this.

AW:
Even where there may be the opportunity for women to access ITCs they may not do so because the content of the information may not be relevant or of interest to them and/or because it may be inaccessible because of the language in which it is available.

CP
The gender divide does exist, but this can be an opportunity for women to learn about ICTs. ICTs operate without borders and are an effective means of networking. Women can therefore gain knowledge through the Internet and other digital revolutions.

WJ
Access is an important factor in addressing the divide but other aspects also exist. Input is also crucial, there is an unequal distribution of gender power relations which if remedied would address the issues of content and developmental direction of ICTs and lead to the empowerment of women and men.

KB
In assessing the digital divide one has to not only look at the economic factors but also incorporate a feminist understanding or view by looking at class, race and other such factors.

2. Are gender perspectives relevant to the telecom and ICT sector? What are the challenges and opportunities in adding a gender perspective?

GM
All the social justice concerns are considered irrelevant within the science and technology field. But gender is relevant if ICTs are to be used as a tool for development. If development focuses on quality of life, the design, structure and economic and social patterns of use must incorporate a gendered perspective. The telecommunications companies must understand the nature of their market, only those who do have market successes.

CP

Telecommunications are not gender neutral. Women must take on the challenge by arming themselves through learning about these new technologies. As women begin to use ICTs more a non-hierarchical structure of learning and networking will emerge.

WR

ICT technologies are not gender neutral though the Telecom and ICT Sector consider it so. Women's needs are not being met because companies don't see that a women's market exists, especially with regards to the developing world and rural areas. There is need to get the attention of governments and companies regarding the critical issues around access (are the structures there?), usability, utility and affordability.

These issues and that of trying to engage those with the money and power to be partners are the challenges that those present here and WSIS have. Finance continues to be a major challenge that undermines the ability to meet any of the priorities and challenges.

JS

If the market sees women as consumers it will find ways to incorporate the gender dimensions. If these decisions are made by the market those unable to be consumers will be marginalized.

AW

It is important to understand the rules and structures of the ICT world. Words such as radio spectrum, wires, bandwidth, ISPS and domain need to be understood. If not, despite the opportunities that may exist the lack of understanding or control over any of the structures of the ICT world will mean that women cannot participate or bridge the ICT gender divide.

LSM

It's important to have a gender perspective in the ICT access and infrastructure. Important points to focus on in order to ensure that ICTs are accessible to women include:

 a) the education of girls in ICTs;
 b) ensuring equal access for girls and boys both within the home and school;
 c) ensuring that more women enter the telecommunications sector at the level of software development and decision-making; and
 d) ensuring that the issue of radio spectrum bandwidth to meet the needs of women in the Developing countries

3. What are the interaction mechanisms to integrate gender perspectives in national telecom and ICT policies?

WJ

Scandinavian ICT policies have a gender perspective, though they may not seem very visible or distinct. Therefore it is true to say that Scandinavian policy makers see no obstacles to including a gender perspective. The main problem or obstacle faced is that of *´clever and highly skilled women´* in decision making positions within the telecommunications sector losing interest in pushing the gender perspective.

KB

There is a huge opportunity for gender sensitive women and individuals from civil society to influence policies but to do this they have to understand their national ICT policy. They need to understand how the policy affects them and why they should be concerned.

GM

There are many women that understand and have talents and experience of the technologies that exist. There is need to incorporate these talents and experiences into national and global policies. To do this there is need to galvanize political will and finances, use the enthusiasm of women in social justice organizations and form alliances with ITU, DAW, UNIFEM, etc. It is important to get action on these so that in the near future the discourse will be on issues of developing ICT policies for the Developing world, strategies for non-literate women, etc. and not on the existence or not of a gender divide.

CP

To integrate a gender perspective there is need for women in decision making positions to feel they have a responsibility to assist other women to overcome obstacles. It is important to have a commitment - women of a particular mindset. It is also possible to use proactive policies that insist on quotas for the representation of women within sectors.

4. How is the labour market affected by telecom and ICTs in terms of gender inequalities? ICTs are thought to increase employment – do they? What challenge do they bring to the labour market - do they lead to gender segregation?

DC

There has been an increase in opportunities for some women in some countries who are subject to cultural restrictions on employment outside the home, eg. Middle East. The opportunities opened up mean that they can now market their services and products without having to leave their homes.

KB

The issue of employment is a double-edged sword as it can reproduce gender stereotyped work, thereby limiting the choices that women have. It would also be true to say that the types of work that women do within the ICT industry are the lowest paid

and least secure, eg., in the UK, women in the science and technology industry are paid 20-30% less than their male counterparts.

WR
Though employment opportunities do exist, the challenges are in opening up leadership and ownership opportunities for women. In the US, which is considered the most advanced regarding women's presence in the higher levels of leadership (CEOs, VPs) with in the ICT field, there has been no increase in percentage of women leaders over the past 20 years.

Women CEOs do exist in a range of industries, but there are still questions over why:
- women 'breaking through' forget to help other women ' why they don´t exercise their influence to challenge the disparity in spending and funding.
- the higher levels of leadership don't like the *'cultural difference'* that women in a senior leadership role bring
- Men with the capital still get to choose the leaders of industry
- Women who have the capital don't go for entrepreneurial risk-taking
- Though women start about 50% of the enterprises less than 10% of capital goes to women's businesses

If this is the case in the best-case scenario what is it like in the rest of the world?

CP
- Employment opportunities for women have opened up but they are at the lower skilled end of the ICT industry, so women have been open to exploitation. Women must therefore excel in technological skills. Developments in ICTs have also led to a spatial reorganization of work within the traditional sectors. This and the gender stereotyping of the nature of work open to women has affected women the most, (eg. contract labour, home working, etc) leading to the lowering of pay, health & safety standards, etc. therefore there is a need to ensure that women are not further disadvantaged and any income generation opportunities lost.

5. How can the United Nations Millennium goals to combat poverty and to promote sustainable development, be linked to the information society? How will the information society address the problems identified in the Millennium goals?

JS
There is a question over whether the Millennium goals actually incorporate gender equality as an aim. Looking at the kinds of commitments that governments made to gender equality is would be fair to say that there are few. There is therefore a need to have concrete gender related commitments and accountability.

ICTs can contribute or destroy existing livelihoods, therefore there is need for thoughtful analysis and commitments to social justice.

AW

Commitments to help women will find no solution unless women have an input, eg. telecentre initiative in Uganda for women from farming communities. The women access interactive information in their own language. In the year since the initiative was set up the women have become empowered and are able to convey their needs, and have been able to sell their products to a wider audience. This is an example of where the community has used opportunities open to them. But this has been possible only because the women were involved in deciding how they wanted to be assisted.

LSM

In looking at the Millennium goals, there are several areas in which ICTs can be used to promote the poverty alleviation:

- application of ICTs can lead to access to education including lifelong learning and e-learning. This will be especially useful to women who had to leave school early or didn't get the opportunity to go to higher education;
- assisting in health literacy – access to information and consultancy;
- participation in the economy by allowing individuals/communities to market their services and products.

6. Do telecom and ICTs promote opportunities for women and men or increase inequalities between men and women or even between women?

CP

To understand whether ICTs increase inequalities or promote equality there is a need to disaggregate data to show clearly who suffers and who benefits from the technologies.

SM

Though women participate in the economy in business and international trade, cultural and social barriers affect the opportunities available to them in both the new and traditional employment sectors. Opportunities for women will not be fully realized until the gender divide is addressed – ie. that issues such as the lack of consultation with women, lack of information and limited access to ICT technologies are addressed.

GM

- Gender Caucus was formed at Bamako with the support of UNIFEM.
- Gender was not incorporated at that PrepCom. Bamako was a disappointment. WSIS have been informed/told that without a gender perspective their aims won't succeed.
- Why? Women are 50%+ of the intended beneficiaries, so in the planning stage women concerns have to be taken on-board or else they will continue to lose out.
- *Recommendations*: see five points in *Gender Perspective Are Central To Any Information Society That Promotes Human Development* paper by WSIS-Gender Caucus).

7. What are the challenges and opportunities for developing countries to acquire ownership of content on a national or regional basis?

Content issue relating to ICTs and trade development. There is lots of international content via the internet. Is there a market for developing of local content – nationally or regionally? Is there a need for it? Can women have a role in developing it?

Shadrack – Transparency International.

Paper being delivered tomorrow (3 July 2002) on local content development and applications, how to market content, role of women and production of content for local consumption.

AW

- There are enormous opportunities in developing and marketing of local content. This has been the case in Uganda where content is available in English and Luganda. There are calls from other parts of Africa for such developments.
- Subject areas are those that women felt were relevant to them – issues that address their specific problems, eg. HIV/Aids. There is need for local content, which can be developed by the community.

Wanjiru Kihoro

The word international content'' does not include Africa.
Local content discussion groups in local languages do exist in Africa, but it is possible to see from the language that the discussion is between men. It is possible to get more women developing content.

James Archibald, McGill University

Re: local content and standards – there is a paucity of international standards. It is advisable to lobby the *Localization Standards Association* in Lausanne, an organization that sets standards for the development of websites and multi-lingual software. They can develop this for translation of websites so that information can be international.

8. What are the positive and/or negative aspects of telecom and ICTs for women entrepreneurs?

GF

- Potential exists for women entrepreneurs.
- Survey on World Telecommunications Day, looked at women's attitude to telecommunications – what was important to women entrepreneurs? 99% in six geographical regions said access was a critical factor.
- Access allowed women to:
     find information and informational sources;
     opportunity to learn through shared experiences.