

Women's Empowerment in the Digital Age: Implementing WSIS Outcomes and Agenda 2030

Introduction

2015 is a landmark year for women's empowerment in multilateral and international fora. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by UN Member States in September, identifies ICTs as key enablers of development and as an essential component of transformative solutions to meet today's development challenges. The catalytic power of ICTs for development is recognized as holding 'great promise for human progress' and cited specifically in 4 of the 17 goals and indicated as a cross cutting tool to be utilized for the achievement of all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDG 5 – 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' – contains an implementation target reinforcing the role of ICTs for gender equality: 'Enhance the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment' (SDG 5b).

In July, the post-2015 development agenda was underpinned by a global framework for financing development, the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*. This agenda aims to mobilize financial and technical resources highlighting the principal need for gender mainstreaming and equality.

It has already been widely recognized throughout past decades that the inclusion of women is vital for the shift towards development and poverty eradication. Yet persistent concerns regarding female inclusion and gender equality remain. Exactly 20 years ago, the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995* called for the 'full and equal participation of women' in and through media and new technologies of communication; yet according to a report by the UN Broadband Commission Working Group on Gender, 200 million fewer women than men around the world have Internet access today. Moreover, the digital gap may well be widening, and according to Intel's estimations this number might be as high as 350 million by 2016. As technology is ubiquitous in today's society, this has wide repercussions to women's social inclusion. Given that over 95 per cent of jobs today have a digital component, if women are not adequately trained, they will have reduced access to employment which could have further ramifications for their social, economic and political inclusion.

It is more than a decade since world leaders came together in Geneva at the World Summit for the Information Society, and affirmed that ICT development provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. They committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should

mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool. We should also work on removing the gender barriers to ICT education and training, and promote equal training opportunities in ICT-related fields for women and girls. Also recently adopted WSIS+10 Outcome Document (Geneva 2014) recognizes both the potential of ICTs as a tool for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and the gender divide in ICTs. The WSIS+10 Statement and Vision and the WSIS Declaration of Principles stated that the development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society.

Looking at the Beijing process and the gender action calls in the WSIS documents, and seeing the rather gloomy picture of female inclusion and participation to the knowledge economy today, there is still a long way to go. Now is therefore the time for action, and the moment is right to galvanize recommitment and build on existing knowledge and evidence. We must not miss the opportunity to leverage the post-2015 agenda to close the persistent gender digital gap: in access, in usage, in content, in leadership and in opportunities in ICTs for women. The effective implementation of the WSIS Action Lines can help accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. To that end, all stakeholders should renew efforts to ensure the convergence of development processes to identify how WSIS can help inform the realization of SDG 5.

This side event will build on the progress made since the drafting of the WSIS, Beijing and development agenda processes. It will provide an opportunity to identify and review possible solutions to address women's empowerment in the digital age and establish political commitment to taking actions to close the digital gender gap in its different dimensions.

In 2014, ITU and UN Women launched the Gender Equality and Mainstreaming in Technology (GEM-Tech) Awards, with the objective of demonstrating a commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment through ICTs, and recognizing achievements and innovative strategies. Leveraging best practices and achievements on advancing digital equality for women and girls, the side event will celebrate the 2015 GEM-Tech winners and Global Achievers, and share and discuss their work on harnessing ICTs to dramatically improve socio-political and economic outcomes and gender equality for women and girls; to promote women's meaningful engagement with ICTs; and to advance their role as decision-makers and producers in the technology sector.

The gender gap in ICTs has to be addressed in various dimensions of access, affordability, skills and usage, and only by closing the digital gender gap shall we be able to realize the full potential of ICTs as a catalytic and transformative tool for sustainable development. ICTs are tools through which gender equality and women's empowerment can be advanced, and are integral to the creation of societies in which both women and men can substantively contribute and participate. It is also essential that women not only benefit from technology, but also participate in the process – from design to application.