Global Network of Women ICT Decision-Makers

Interview with Jasna Matiæ

Jasna Matiæ, Serbia’s Minister of Telecommunications and Information Society, is the driving force behind the new Global Network of Women ICT Decision-Makers. Ms Matiæ started promoting the Network during the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in Guadalajara in October 2010. The outcome was that conference delegates overwhelmingly supported the creation of the Network, along with “gender mainstreaming in ITU and promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women through information and communication technologies”, as envisaged in Resolution 70 (Rev. Guadalajara, 2010).

Ms Matiæ launched the Network in New York on 25 February 2011 with Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women, during the 55th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. ITU Secretary-General Dr Hamadoun I. Touré was one of the international leaders to lend his support to the launch of the new Global Network. In a video message, Dr Touré said that ITU was committed to promoting information and communication technologies as tools to empower women and girls, as well as to encouraging more girls and women to join the industry. “In the world today, there are about 850 million young women aged under 24. With the ICT sector now serving as the world’s single biggest growth engine for jobs, we’re going to need their skills, their enthusiasm, and their fresh ideas.”

Ms Matiæ announced the creation of the Network on 11 March during a high-level debate at ITU to mark the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day. ITU News had the opportunity of asking her a few questions about the vision, the mission, the objectives and the next steps for this new Global Network.

What is your vision for this new Network?

Jasna Matiæ The vision for the Network is to create gender equality and empower women through information and communication technology. We would really like to open up this sector for women and girls throughout the world. We envisage a dual approach. On one hand, we hope that women and girls will pursue careers and education leading to this very exciting and high growth area. On the other hand, we also would like women and girls throughout the world to
take advantage of information and communication technologies, as consumers and users, so that their lives become better.

What is the aim of the Network?  
**Jasna Matiæ** The key mission is to raise awareness in order to encourage women and girls to use information and communication technologies and to pursue careers in this area. Our overriding objective is the achievement of a supportive environment for women and girls that will enable them to be involved and to choose information and communication technologies as empowerment tools and as a path for career development.

Who can join the Network?  
**Jasna Matiæ** We expect women ICT professionals to become our members. So far, we have seen great enthusiasm on the part of all the women who have made careers in ICT. We anticipate that women throughout the world who are involved with ICT — whether from government ministries, agencies, independent regulatory bodies, companies or academia — will become the prominent members of this Network. We also hope that young women and girls who would like to pursue ICT careers will become members and take advantage of the Network’s mentoring and shadowing projects.

Obviously, the Network is open to women from the ITU membership. It is easy to join the Network. Our portal was launched in New York on 25 February, and there is a brief online form to fill in (the web address is witnet.org).

What are the key activities of the Network?  
**Jasna Matiæ** Our flagship activity, which is mentioned in Resolution 70, is Girls in ICT Day. We expect all ITU Member countries to declare the fourth Thursday of April every year as Girls in ICT Day, and to celebrate the day by encouraging girls to pursue education and careers in ICT. This year, Girls in ICT Day will be celebrated on 28 April.

Our other activities will be our shadowing and mentoring projects (see page 38). These projects will bring together established professionals and young hopefuls. Women who have established careers in ICT will take young women and girls under their wing and show them what it means to have a career in ICT, and how to succeed in this very challenging and prominent area.

If you could achieve just three things with this Network over the next four years (in other words, between the time Resolution 70 was adopted and the next Plenipotentiary Conference in 2014) what would they be?  
**Jasna Matiæ** We would like to see Girls in ICT Day becoming an international event, so that girls throughout the world are given the idea that they can have careers in ICT. The result should be an increased number of girls choosing maths, science, engineering and IT as their majors in high schools and at college. We would also expect to see an increase in the number of women ICT decision-makers, in other words more women in managerial and executive positions in governments, businesses and academia.
Do you already have specific projects in Serbia to empower women and girls and increase their opportunities in ICT careers, to give effect to Resolution 70?

Jasna Matić: Together with the IT Students Association at one of Serbia’s universities, we have helped the girls form a girls’ chapter. We are now engaged in a number of activities with them, such as round tables and panel discussions. The girls will be the key targets for the mentoring and shadowing projects that we are implementing in Serbia this year.

Are there any strategies in place in Serbia that you could share with the ITU membership on how to increase the number of women ICT decision-makers?

Jasna Matić: We have a plan together with our Association of Business Women to work on empowering women to strive for managerial positions. The association has an IT section, and we hope that, through networking, this “all girls club” will achieve the same sort of results as old boys networks have been achieving for a number of years now.

From your own experience as Minister, what do you see as the biggest obstacles and opportunities for women and girls to become ICT decision-makers?

Jasna Matić: I think the biggest obstacles are the expectations of the general public in regard to the traditional gender roles. These attitudes are still prevalent in families and in schools among teachers.

To be more optimistic and look at the opportunities, I believe that information and communication technologies really lend themselves to women because of the communication part, which I think comes more naturally to women. Women tend to be more successful communicators, especially at the global level. So women should participate in the ICT industry, and I believe that women will be the dominant force in the global communication industry in the years to come.

In what ways can women themselves contribute to improving the gender balance in top jobs?

Jasna Matić: Women need to do exactly the same thing that men do: promote each other, help each other, communicate more, form their own network,
mentor younger colleagues, and seek advice from older colleagues.

Do you see a specific role for ICT in promoting the goals of the Network?

Jasna Matiæ: Yes, of course! ICT is both the topic and the tool of this Network. Our Network will predominantly function online, and we expect many of our key projects also to be online. So there is online mentoring and online shadowing, and of course all the brochures and toolkits are available online. ICT will be the enabler as well as the focus of our Network.

Resolution 70 as revised by the Guadalajara Conference is still new, so Serbia will probably be a trailblazer in celebrating the first Girls in ICT Day on Thursday 28 April 2011. What plans do you have?

Jasna Matiæ: We will have various activities. The multinational ICT companies that are present in Serbia will be opening their doors to girls, high-school and college students alike, so that the girls can see what their business is all about. The Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Society will be reaching out to schools throughout the country, and together with some of our telecom operators will be launching a competition for the best tweet on the role of ICT in our lives. The winners will come to Belgrade, spend a day at the Ministry and visit the Nikola Tesla Museum of Technical Sciences. In the evening we will have a networking event that will be attended by the girls and by ICT professionals. The first hour and a half will be for quick mentoring (the so-called “speed dating” part of the event) and after that we will have the informal part of the event.

What would you say to a girl asking for your advice about a career in ICT?

Jasna Matiæ: I would say that ICT definitely offers a great career for a woman. She will often have to face different expectations, and when she enters a meeting room a man may say “Oh, if you are here to translate, sit at the back”. But a girl needs to pursue her dreams, and this definitely is an area where women can really express their talents and be successful. So I would say never give up; and that general advice applies to any goal in life.
How do you plan to involve governments, international organizations, the private sector and individuals in promoting the Network?

Jasna Matić: We already have a number of women Ministers and Deputy Ministers who really want to be involved, as well as international organizations. I imagine that private companies will also come on board. In the global struggle for talent, companies and government institutions — as well as international organizations — are really eager to bring in as many diverse talents as possible. So we hope to have them all involved in our activities. Some of them have already expressed their interest in funding our activities, and all of them — without any exception — have expressed an interest in participating. So in the toolkits available on the portal — the Girls in ICT Day toolkit, as well as the mentoring and shadowing toolkits — there are a variety of activities that are suitable for various levels of resources. We hope that all the interested parties will be able to find something that is appropriate for them.

Any final thoughts?

Jasna Matić: I very much appreciate the support that we have got from ITU, not only from the Secretary-General himself, but also from the great ladies that have worked with us. I expect to have excellent cooperation with the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau and its newly elected Director, Mr Brahima Sanou. We also have great expectations based on our excellent experience with UN Women and with Madame Bachelet herself, who expressed great interest in working with us and has supported us whole-heartedly up to now.

Ms Matić: You have made great strides in bringing the digital dividend to Serbia, especially in the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Could you highlight some of the latest developments and do you have a time-line for when the switchover will be complete in Serbia?

Jasna Matić: In accordance with the strategy adopted by the Government of Serbia almost two years ago, the switchover date is set for 4 April 2012, so that Serbia will be in line with neighbouring countries. We have selected the most advanced standards for digital television, that is MPEG4 and DVB-T2, and a number of countries have followed our lead. We have started implementing programme funded by the European Union that will help us acquire the equipment needed for digital broadcasting. We are also receiving technical assistance from a team led by experts from the BBC, who have been on the ground for two months now and will stay with us for more than a year. Now we are at the stage of making a detailed plan so that we can accomplish the transition by the set date.
Projects of the Global Network of Women ICT Decision-Makers

Mentoring project

Mentoring is increasingly recognized as an important training and developmental tool. Most senior business leaders have been mentored at some point in their careers, and mentored executives seem to enjoy higher levels of remuneration than their non-mentored peers.

The Global Network of Women ICT Decision-Makers has set up a mentoring project to enable professional women who have established their careers in ICT to share their experience with girls, and encourage them to embark on a career in ICT.

Mentors do not attempt to advise mentees directly. They assist and guide their mentees to come to their own conclusions as to how best to achieve their goals. The most important characteristics of mentoring are relationship building and the trust that develops between the two sides. The mentor needs to encourage the mentee, and enable the mentee to see all her qualities and be the best she can be. In order for mentoring to be successful, both sides must be willing to dedicate time and effort to the relationship.

Whether as a mentee, gaining the experience and guidance of a professional who has been there before, or as a mentor, receiving full mentoring training and contributing to the development of others, participating in mentoring is hugely rewarding.

Guidelines for mentoring and for organizing a Shadowing project are available at www.witnet.org

Shadowing project

Shadowing is a training technique where a person (the shadow), usually a student, is paired with a leader in the workplace (the host) to enable the shadow to get a hands-on feel of what it is like to have a career. Shadowing is a popular way of training new employees so that they can seamlessly begin to work in a new environment.

The idea of the shadowing project set up by the Global Network of Women ICT Decision-Makers is to use this technique to promote careers in ICT to young women. The focus is on students who are about to choose which subjects to specialize in. By taking a first-hand look at the world of ICT work, they can see how fulfilling and rewarding ICT careers are. Bringing students into the workplace to see a highly placed woman ICT decision-maker at work makes the option of pursuing a career in ICT very real and tangible.

The shadowing project shows female students why they should continue their education and why they should pursue careers in the field of ICT. It creates a critical link between education and success.