**Policy Intervention at WSIS+10**Ms Lakshmi Puri, ASG and DED, UN Women
10 June 2014, Geneva

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Colleagues and partners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we approach 2015 and chart a course for the decades ahead, we have an incredible opportunity to aim high, tackle persistent challenges such as inequalities, and apply innovation and creativity for building sustainable, adaptive and resilient societies. ICTs and the knowledge society they support are critical to this picture.

As a result of ICTs we are facing a future that is at once thrilling and ripe with possibilities for positive transformation, perhaps somewhat daunting in the pace and scope of change, and gives pause for caution as we negotiate critical issues such as inclusiveness, safety and privacy. Collectively directing these tools and structures of the information society to respond to all of humanity’s needs is an imperative and directing them to women’s empowerment and gender equality is essential to this effort. We cannot talk about inclusiveness, social justice in the information society, and bridging the digital divide without putting women at the center of the conversation. Indeed, one of the divides we need to bridge is the gender divide.

Women’s empowerment and gender equality and ICT are mutual enablers and beneficiaries for each other. Those in turn are enablers of sustainable development in its three dimensions, economic, social and environmental.

**Existing Commitments**

We have much to build on.

Let me take us back not to 2005 or 2003 when the WSIS process commenced but to 1995 when the Beijing Platform for Action was agreed. In defining women’s rights and critical areas for action, we saw a visionary position and dedicated section on ICTs within the platform alongside issues such as education, economic empowerment and political participation. There was recognition of the importance of ICTs even before their ubiquitous use, and the strong will to ensure that these technologies responded to the needs of women, promoted women’s active participation in society, and emphasized their active role as leaders in these sectors.

Many of these same issues were later captured in the WSIS outcomes. The importance of women’s access, capacity building, content, women’s leadership in the information society, and digital empowerment of women and girls was recognized in previous WSIS outcome documents. The Geneva Declaration of Principles calls for women to be key actors in the information society, that the information society should enable women’s empowerment and that a gender equality perspective should be mainstreamed throughout all commitments.

**Review of Implementation**

So how are we faring in implementation? Over the past two decades we have seen progress on many fronts and in ICTs making a difference to women. Yet outside the periphery, a pressing need remains for women to co-develop and harness these advances to positively impact their rights and lives, while preventing further entrenchment of inequality, discrimination, exploitation and abuse. ICTs have not yet been a game changer for women but they should and *must* be. We are not seeing fast enough progress, nor transformative scale.

Let us make….. the women vendors in Papua New Guinea who use e-payments to bypass corrupt middle men, the women in Jordan forging new and high paying careers in ICT, the women in Brazilian favelas using apps to map unsafe spaces, women in Africa using mobile phones to network for peace, organizations that are building a cadre of women community bloggers or fighting for women’s rights online, and visionary leaders in the ICT sector …… let us make these women *the rules not the exceptions*. Women are innovators, holders of knowledge, builders of solutions. Let us recognize and support them and ensure their rights online and offline are enjoyed and are mutually beneficial. Let us also challenge and eradicate harmful practices that have emerged online, push back against the threats that ICTs also hold and for an ethical information society.

To do this we have to be much more deliberate and accelerate action. We count on all stakeholders to invest, scale, and undertake necessary interventions and special measures around women’s access, digital literacy and capacities, content development, active leadership and digital empowerment. We have to tackle the entire ecosystem. As such, we call on you to embrace a lens through which the differentiated ways in which women and men experience, engage with and benefit from ICTs are *consistently* considered and addressed including the interplay of issues and norms online and off as well as power dynamics and structures that perpetuate many forms of inequalities, including around gender. We also call on the gender community to play a greater role within the conversations around internet governance.

**UN Women**

When WSIS took place ten years ago, there was no single consolidated UN entity fully dedicated to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. With the creation of UN Women, Member States made clear that gender equality and women’s empowerment must be achieved as an important driver of sustainable development in all its dimensions, peace and security, and human rights. UN Women’s functions cover intergovernmental normative support, UN coordination and accountability, multi-stakeholders partnerships, knowledge hub, and programmatic activities in 90 countries.

UN Women is committed to working to better integrate issues around ICTs and the information society within our work and the work of the broader gender community. This is a clear priority of the UN Women Executive Director. We look forward to the WSIS process responding forcefully to better integrate gender with the creation of a specific focus area on women’s empowerment, as well as continuing to mainstream this throughout all the work of partners. We are also working with UNGIS and Action Line leads to this end.

**Looking forward**

We are pleased that in the WSIS+10 forward looking vision, priorities and in the section on Action Lines and their implementation, we are seeing continued support for gender equality and women’s empowerment in the context of the information society and a specific role for UN Women. I appreciate the broad support we have received through this process and would like to extend a special thanks for Dr. Toure for his leadership around these issues.

UN Women and constituencies of women’s organizations across the world had higher ambitions for this text. We had hoped for an action line on gender. Although this was not possible this time, we hope that it will be in the future.

We also need greater synergies with other processes. It is essential to align what we are doing here with the post-2015 and Sustainable Development Goals process.

We see important linkages between WSIS action lines and the goal on achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment currently in the draft of the Open Working on SDGs. For example, e-employment is linked to the SDG target on women’s full and productive employment and decent work; the action line on e-learning links to the target on equal access to quality education; the action line on information and communication infrastructure links to the target on non-discriminatory access to essential services and infrastructure, including ICT; and so on.

In fact, I am pleased to report that the gender equality focus area is one of those with the clearest references to ICT, including in the section on Means of Implementation. This positions us well to take forward the WSIS+10 Vision in the context of sustainable development more broadly.

We also need to take full opportunity of the 20-year anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to reinvigorate and expand commitments for gender equality and women’s empowerment.

**Conclusion**

As we make and implement the vision for women’s empowerment under the WSIS forward looking recommendations, renew and redouble our commitments around ICTs under Beijing+20, as well as influence the post 2015 agenda on the nexus of ICTs and gender, I call on all of us to take the necessary and bold steps so that this confluence of processes becomes a turning point for greater action to create an information and knowledge society for all.

We are talking about nothing less than ensuring the information society serves half the world’s population, half the world’s needs and takes advantage of half the world’s talent. There is no time to lose.

Thank you.