



Gender Dimensions of Development-oriented policies for a socio-economic inclusive information society, including access, infrastructure and enabling environment

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The United Nations system recognises the importance of integrating gender equality into science and technology for development and ICTs. In the last ten years, the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and the Beijing +5 Outcome Document noted the role of S&T as fundamental components for development and the importance of ensuring that women have equal access and training to enable them to take advantage of the opportunities technological change offer. They also called for actions to ensure that women can access and use information and communications technologies for education (formal and non-formal), training, employment and entrepreneurship. Beijing+ 10, in addition, noted the role of ICTs in training, empowerment and economic advancement, including the use of ICTs to support women's small and medium enterprises.

Both the Geneva Declaration and the Tunis Commitment documents of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) include strong references to integrating gender equality into the information society. Paragraph 12 of the Geneva Declaration states:

We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on 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 to that end.

1. The Gender Divide

While Internet access rates for women in the US and Canada are 50% or more, making the Internet a ubiquitous part of life for most women in North America, this is not true for the rest of the world – including Europe. A Gender Divide continues to exist in most countries, particularly in the poor countries of the world. Although rates of access to Internet and other ICTs for women are fairly high (40-50% of users) in several countries, in most countries around the world they are lower than 40%. However, even in countries with high Internet penetration rates, women often have a lower rate of access. In general, women use computers and other ICTs less than men,

access the Internet less and for shorter periods, don't have the same levels of access at work, and use community access points less.

Data collected by the ITU and others indicate that, contrary to what might be expected, gender patterns in Internet use do not vary equally with Internet penetration, that is, **women's rates of use of the Internet will not automatically rise with national rates of Internet penetration.** For example, while the gender gap has vanished in some countries which have high Internet penetration, others, such as Norway, Luxembourg, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and France have not seen women's rates of access approach or become equal to that of men's. In fact, in Germany, the UK, France and Norway, for the years for which we have data women make up less than 40% of internet users. On the other hand, the rate of 40% female internet users in the Netherlands is similar to that of Brazil, Mexico, and Zimbabwe, countries where the overall internet penetration rate is less than 5% (Huyer et al, 2005).¹

The reasons for these trends have not yet been determined, but we do know that a range of variables affecting access and use of Internet and other ICTs include sex, socioeconomic level, ethno-cultural group, rural/urban location; level of education, and age. We know that women have lower levels of literacy worldwide, making up two thirds of the illiterate population. Women and girls in general have lower levels of education (with the exceptions of girls' enrollment in primary schools in some countries) and are less prone to reach higher education levels in many countries. Women make up the majority of the population in rural areas in many developing regions, the result of male migration to urban areas for employment. Sociocultural and religious customs such as restrictions on travel by women and girls, restrictions on interactions with members of the opposite sex, and preconceptions about the ability of females to understand and manipulate technology all contribute to reducing women's use of ICT. Even where women are present in public access centers and the workplace, gendered patterns of behavior and interaction such as harassment, belittlement of women's abilities, and the prevalence of pornography at cyber-café's will mitigate against use by women. Women's double and triple workloads of domestic, income-generation and community management activities mean that they often don't have free time to travel to, learn about and use ICTs. Finally, ICTs and their content are overwhelmingly designed by men, in the English language, and don't often reflect the interests, concerns, perspectives and information needs of women in the developing world.

Recommendations

For these reasons, universal access strategies need to take into account the differing opportunities, access to resources and perspectives of different groups in society, including but not restricted to women. Special steps will need to be taken and disadvantaged groups may need to be targeted to ensure that all members of society benefit from broadband internet access, in particular those in rural areas.

If ICTs are to support economic development through enhanced business services in a country, the wider range of technology options which meet the resource requirements and capabilities of rural farmers and small entrepreneurs will need to be implemented. Achieving universal access for socioeconomic development will need to take into account a range of ICT strategies and media so that all groups in society can be reached. Technologies and strategies need to be appropriate to the infrastructural, economic, language and cultural context if they are going to

¹ The extent of the gender divide in the Caribbean is not known, although some data indicate that women's access is greater than in the rest of Latin America.

make a difference in a community and provide access for a socioeconomic inclusive information society.

We propose that the draft proposal include the recommendation:

"CSTD can act as a forum for governments to share best practices and information on a range of access strategies to supplement broadband internet access and support the all levels of socioeconomic activity in a country with a focus on reaching women and people in rural areas."

We also propose that it include the statement:

"Universal [or broadband] access strategies will need to take into account the differing opportunities, access to resources and perspectives of different groups in society, including but not restricted to women. Specific strategies and targeting of disadvantaged groups will ensure that all members of society benefit from broadband internet access, in particular those in rural areas."