



## Gender and ICT

Centre for Women  
UN- ESCWA

A quarterly ECW issuance aiming at raising the gender awareness and responsiveness through highlighting the gender dimensions in various fields.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) play an increasingly important role in the globalizing world, and new devices and technologies are constantly being developed. With growing importance, however, it also became apparent that not everybody benefits in the same way from the new opportunities that ICT hold, but that there is a growing digital divide between those who benefit and those who do not. The Digital Divide has many dimensions, one of them being the *Gender Digital Divide*.

### Why are women not fully benefiting from technological developments?

Just as ICT are not socially neutral, they are neither gender neutral. They are not equally accessed, managed and controlled by men and women, and men and women have different needs and constraints when accessing and using ICT.

The main challenges for women to access and use ICT are:

- Cost of access and connectivity: because women still earn less income than men, and have limited or no control over financial resources but are often financially dependent on a male family member.
- Illiteracy or limited knowledge of foreign languages that dominate modern technology, especially the internet: because women still have less access to education than men.
- Gender-based roles and responsibilities: (a) Time: for most women, how they spend their time is not their own decision but is decided for them by responsibilities for the family which leave little time for themselves. (b) Social perceptions and attitudes: for many women, the ability to move freely in public



space is limited due to gender perceptions of the society. They cannot attend trainings in community centres or use the internet in internet cafes. Also due to social perceptions, girls and women experience negative social attitudes and lack of family support towards their interest in technology, and they lack female role models.

- Conflict: because in conflict and war contexts, women are even more confined to the private space for lack of safety and fear of violence.



### Special events in the ESCWA Centre for Women

► "Strengthening National Mechanisms for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women": a multi-year project which aims to strengthen the collaboration and synergies between different mechanisms at national level to facilitate achievement of the goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women, in collaboration with United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) through the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and the five Regional Commissions of the United Nations.

#### Highlights:

- 1- Why is it Important to Integrate a Gender-Perspective When Planning ICT Activities, Projects, Programmes and Policies?
- 2- How Can Women's Access to ICT Be Improved?
- 3- Things to Consider When Planning ICT for Development With A Gender Perspective

ESCWA Project: *Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities*

Did You Know That...

## ***Why is it important to integrate a gender perspective when planning ICT activities, projects, programmes and policies?***

Unless explicit measures are taken to increase women's access to and benefit from ICT, new developments might increase gender disparities instead of leading to integrated socio-economic development. Currently, women still are at a disadvantage when making decisions that affect their lives, and are not yet able to make informed decisions and to fully live up to their potential.

In order to enable women to achieve greater participation and to benefit from socio-economic development, ICT must be adjusted to their needs. While there has been intensive work during the past years on how to include the poor (e.g. the 100-Dollar-laptop-initiative), it became apparent that women are not benefiting from such initiatives and programmes automatically if they are not specifically targeted as beneficiaries.

The Gender Digital Divide, i.e. the gap between women and men in benefiting from ICT, is highest in Arab countries. While ICT is booming in the Arab world, Arab women still represent only 4% of internet users<sup>1</sup>. They play an even lesser role as entrepreneurs and decision makers in the field of ICT, which means that content and technologies are dominantly chosen from a male perspective and for male users. Thus, the gender gap in ICT is continuously widening and men are increasingly participating from the boom in ICT while women are left behind.

ICT has created new employment opportunities, also for women, but gender segregation remains a challenge: While men hold the majority of high-skilled, high-valued jobs with high participation and influence level, women are concentrated in the low-skilled, low-valued jobs, e.g. call centres, data entry and processing positions, etc., with no participation in decision-making and with no influence.

If well planned, ICT can increase women's influence on decisions that affect their lives, and enable them to take advantage of life-improving opportunities offered by electronic services like telemedicine, online education, e-governance and e-commerce.

<sup>1</sup> Internet World Stats, 2006 [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)



## ***How Can Women's Access to ICT be improved?***

Engendering ICT does not only mean help more women use ICT, it means transforming the ICT sector in order to make it accessible for men and women alike. It is essential that sex-disaggregated data on ICT use and requirement of users are collected. Plans, programmes and strategies in connection with ICT must be gender-sensitive, i.e. take the needs of the whole spectrum of society into consideration. And when it comes to content, content of special interest to women must be provided and be accessible, women's economic participation in the society should be promoted, and violence against women and children must be regulated in the internet and media generally.

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***"Engendering ICT means transforming the ICT sector in order to make it accessible for men and women alike"***

## **Past and current initiatives for improving women's access to ICT include the following:**

- **E-commerce** initiatives that link women directly to global markets through the Internet, as well as support their activities with market and production information.
- **E-governance programmes** to make government services (also land and voter registration) more accessible to citizens by providing them electronically, in some cases with an explicit strategy to ensure these services reach women and others who face barriers to access.
- **Health education programmes** have used the radio and/or television to communicate information related to women's sexual and reproductive health in order to reach women in remote areas.

## ***Things to consider when planning ICT for development with a gender perspective***

- In some areas, social barriers prevent women from publicly attending trainings on technologies and enhance their skills in ICT → In order to reach poor women and women in remote areas, training opportunities in informal settings should be provided.
- For the same reason, the use of ICT can be incorporated into health programmes, micro-enterprise initiatives, community activities targeted at women → Even if ICT is not the main focus of a project, other activities can be used to improve ICT skills of women and girls.
- Targeting girls as beneficiaries can open opportunities also for their mothers
- Content of training materials must be adapted to the interest and needs of women
- Women must be included in the planning stages of any project
- Governments, decision makers and educators must be sensitized for the need for women to benefit from ICT in order to achieve real socio-economic development

### ***ESCWA project Knowledge Networks through ICT Access Points for Disadvantaged Communities***

ESCWA is implementing the project "Knowledge networks through ICT access points for disadvantaged communities", as lead agency along with the regional commissions of the United Nations over a period of 36 months, starting in 2006.

The main objective is to empower poor and disadvantaged communities, particularly women, by transforming selected existing ICT access points into hubs of global knowledge networks; and by providing, developing, organizing, sharing and disseminating knowledge pertinent to these communities.

[www.escwa.un.org/divisions/main.asp?division=ictd](http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/main.asp?division=ictd)

## Did you know that:

- The UN rank access to ICT the third most important issue facing women globally, after poverty and violence<sup>2</sup>
- Only 4% of Arab women use ICT<sup>3</sup> while worldwide their share is 45%, in industrialized countries even 50%<sup>4</sup>
- Unlike most men, most women are not independent in their choices but depend on family approval for their choice of education, job, workplace, as well as how they divide their time
- Although teleworking from home provides good opportunities for women who otherwise would not be able to work at all, at the same time it re-emphasizes gender segregation and keeps women's contribution to society and economy invisible. Therefore, some women prefer institution-based teleworking over home teleworking
- Women's organizations can operate more efficiently with ICT due to the more direct and more inexpensive nature of disseminating information to their beneficiaries
- European and International stakeholders have developed a code for best practices for women in ICT to support women's participation in the ICT labour market and in ICT decision-making positions<sup>5</sup>

2 UNDP 2003

3 Internet World Stats, 2006 [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)

4 ILO [http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/ampro/cinterfor/temas/gender/g\\_ict/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/ampro/cinterfor/temas/gender/g_ict/index.htm)

5 [www.ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/itgirls/doc/code.pdf](http://www.ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/itgirls/doc/code.pdf)

## We're on the Web!

See us at:

[www.escwa.un.org](http://www.escwa.un.org)

## About Our Organization...

The ESCWA Centre for Women was established on October 1, 2003, following the Commission's adoption of Resolution 240(XXII). This resolution, recognizing that a fundamental part of development is the empowerment of women, called for the creation of a Committee on Women comprising the member countries, and for the establishment of a women's Centre at ESCWA. The Centre continues and expands on the work carried out by the Women Empowerment and Gender Mainstreaming Team, formerly a part of the Social Development Division at ESCWA.

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