

# ICT for Development



## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

### TECHNOLOGY: THE GENDER DIMENSION

The potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to break barriers to knowledge, political participation and economic opportunity is vast. Examples of ICT's promise as a tool for positive change for poor women and men in developing countries are inspiring: a group of women artisans from India sell their textiles direct to European consumers online; women's organizations use the Internet to share information and build a national coalition for change; real-time e-mail exchanges between parliamentarians and their constituents spur accountability and transparency.

But these sorts of developing country examples are still relatively few, and harnessing the power of ICT for human development remains a monumental challenge. The speed of technological transformation has created a huge chasm – the so-called digital divide – between those with ICT capacity and access and those without. Poor women in the South suffer additional disadvantages – as citizens of low-income countries, as poor people within their own societies, and as women. Indeed, the UN ranks access to ICT as the third most important issue facing women globally, after poverty and violence.



Gender is a major factor in determining who has access to, and who benefits from, information technology. Addressing ICT as a 'gender-neutral' technology can entrench inequality and even enlarge the gender gap – making ICT a 'gender-negative' technology. Without strategic targeted actions, women will continue to be disproportionately represented among the 'information poor', and the potential of ICT to promote women's equality and empowerment will go unrealized.

There are many barriers to women's access to ICT. Information and communications technology is a uniquely male industry. Women are underrepresented among ICT users, and nearly absent as substantive producers of technology or content, much less as decision makers. More women are illiterate than men, and fewer girls than boys complete secondary school or attend science and technology training programmes, perpetuating the male bias inherent in the ICT sector. Because more women than men are poor, cost is a greater barrier to their ICT access and use. Moreover, gender-based roles and responsibilities have a significant impact. Earning a living combined with domestic responsibilities and care-giving leave poor women little time for learning new skills. Cultural norms and even concerns over personal safety may make it difficult for women to attend training courses or visit telecentres.

## MAKING ICT WORK FOR WOMEN

Given the many factors that conspire to exclude the poor from the network age, and the deeply imbedded male biases that pervade the world of ICT, a combination of gender analysis and affirmative action is urgently needed. Education is key, particularly the promotion of gender parity in secondary school. In tertiary education, ICT training should be offered in departments with high percentages of female enrolment.

To reach poor women, increasing opportunities for training and access in non-formal settings is critical. Use of ICT can be incorporated into health programmes, micro-enterprise initiatives targeted to women, and community development activities. Partnering with those who understand the social, cultural and economic circumstances of poor women is a useful approach, for instance, offering training and access through NGOs that have already developed outreach strategies and have the trust of local women. Targeting girls can open doors not just for them, but also for their mothers, with the youngsters acting as intermediaries to the often foreign world of technology. The content of training materials also needs to be geared to the skills and interests of women and girls.

Telecentres are an important tool for giving women access to e-mail, the web, electronic networks and distance learning – as well as to older technologies like telephones, facsimile machines and photocopiers. In designing telecentres, it is important to look at how both women and men will use the space and resources. Telecentres should be located where women can easily, safely and comfortably get to them. Facilities should allow for separate spaces or times for women and men in cultures where the sexes do not mingle.

For the truly transformative potential of ICT to be realized, women must participate in the policy-setting and planning processes for technology. And government leaders, educators, decision makers and those in the ICT field must put women's needs on their agendas. UNDP

## UNDP IN ACTION: LITHUANIA

A mother of two, divorced and unemployed, Zydruė Petrukiene found herself without any skills to get a job. Now, Ms. Petrukiene is one of the first of 16 women to graduate from computer literacy courses at the Alytus Women's Crisis Centre. The centre has recently added classes that are helping women find new positions in an economy that requires solid ICT skills.

Angele Barauskiene, who heads the centre, says Ms. Petrukiene was strongly motivated to find an occupation, and was determined to learn. Some of the other women who registered for the course, she says, "couldn't get over the phase of touching the mouse of a computer."

The Alytus Women's Crisis Centre is one of five women's NGOs that are participating in a joint UNDP and Ministry of Social Security programme aimed at improving women's ICT skills. The project was financed by the Japanese Women in Development Fund, with software donated by Microsoft. The project aims to train 800 women over three years. The goal is to enable these women to find employment and create new jobs for themselves and others.

*Source: From an article in UNDP's CHOICES magazine, December 2003, available at <http://www.undp.org/dpa/choices/2003/december/ict.html#Nepal>*

can assist governments to identify gaps in opportunities and outcomes for girls and women, and help them identify gender-specific, measurable goals and objectives for the ICT sector. UNDP can also support institutional structures promoting national ICT development in a way that benefits women, and help bring representatives of women's organizations and gender experts into the policy formulation process.

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

'Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study' provides an excellent overview of key issues and concrete recommendations. It is available at [http://learnlink.aed.org/Publications/Gender\\_Book/pdf/Gender\\_Book\\_Photos.pdf](http://learnlink.aed.org/Publications/Gender_Book/pdf/Gender_Book_Photos.pdf)