

Statement by
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at the WSIS Gender Caucus High Level Panel
Towards an Action Plan for an Equitable Information Society

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Distinguished Delegates, Colleagues, and Friends,

It is my great honour and pleasure to be here today on the eve of the World Summit on the Information Society, to reflect on the most appropriate strategies for achieving an equitable Information Society. Allow me to express my gratitude to a group of committed gender advocates, the WSIS Gender Caucus, whom we have been pleased to support and whose inspiring work is forging global efforts towards building a fair and equitable participation of women in the Information Society. At UNIFEM, we are truly proud of having been associated with this global movement since the inception of the Caucus.

We are here to foster leadership and support a movement, that brings together the political commitment of governments, the skills of ICT experts, academics and entrepreneurs, the gender and poverty-reduction expertise of social entrepreneurs, with the goal to bridge the gender digital divide in the world. I want to share with you some of my thoughts about what it can do and why it is so important.

It is widely recognized that the digital divide threatens to increase inequities between rich and poor, between those with and without advanced education. Inherent in this threat, but not sufficiently recognized and understood, is the digital divide between women and men.

In the vast majority of developing countries, almost all communities are on the wrong side of the digital divide - owing to lack of dependable infrastructure, high cost of equipment and high cost of access to telephone lines and Internet connectivity. And the digital divide mirrors and magnifies other social divides, such as economic opportunity, human rights, and gender inequality. In this context, especially, we must again ask where are the women? We must remember that women are dramatically affected by higher illiteracy rates; they lack ICT training and access because of their productive, reproductive and community management roles; they have less access to financial resources than their male counterparts; they are constrained by socio-cultural inhibitions that consider them less capable of understanding and operating technologies.

The United Nations has committed itself to bridging the digital divide. At the Millennium Assembly in September 2000, the Secretary General's report stated: "the digital divide can-- and will--be bridged" because the capital that matters most now is intellectual rather than financial, and because the core product, information, gains in value as its users increase. The WSIS needs to be that bridge.

A steadily growing number of projects and programmes around the world have developed innovative strategies to address constraints the world's women face in their access to and use of ICTs. They range from skills training for women, to researching the gendered impacts of telecentres, to building web sites to link women entrepreneurs to markets. Some are breaking new ground in analysis and understanding of the challenges ahead. It is becoming clear that without active intervention by gender advocates, new ICTs are unlikely to make the kinds of

positive contributions to gender equality, sustainable development and democratization that have been touted. But, while there is a great deal of effort and investment for expanding 'access', there is far less attention being paid to the extent to which women and gender concerns are shaping the regulatory and policy environments that will ultimately determine the utility and relevance of these technologies to poverty eradication efforts. The strategic challenge before us today is to identify the critical entry points for not only ensuring that both women and men benefit from the opportunities presented by new ICTs, but that new ICTs support greater economic and political equality.

At UNIFEM, we believe that women and gender considerations must shape the regulatory environments that surround the design, introduction, and deployment of technologies. We have been working for the past several years to support diverse uses by women of new and traditional ICTs, recognizing the power of these to support organizing and commerce within and between countries and communities. Together, 4 C's: Content, Connection, Capability, and Control make up UNIFEM's work around ICTs. Rather than being distinct components, they underlie an overall approach to gender and ICTs.

For women, content is directly linked to use. If women are to be able to make use of the Internet for income-generation, education or advocacy, there must be more relevant content. This includes both substance and languages. Women are producers as well as consumers of information and knowledge and this is an important area of support. As long as we see women as merely the consumers of technologies, or technologies as essentially neutral in their design, technology projects will fail to make a noticeable difference in the balance of power that underlies, perpetuates and is often at the core of feminized poverty.

Greater connection and exchange within and between countries and continents, between women's organizations and global policy-makers made possible by ICTs are opening real opportunities for women. Stories of global campaigns conducted via email or grassroots women using the web to get the latest prices on their products are real. Yet we must remember that, because connection often remains limited to certain groups, the risks of exclusion and its effects are also real.

Building the capability of women to take advantage of new opportunities and new technologies is essential. But, capability has a number of dimensions: it includes not only whether women are coming to the telecentre or able to use a computer, but the extent to which women can be leaders in software design. Equally critical is to build a network of women and men who understand the ICT regulatory and policy environment and can advocate for gender equality in technology development and design. The ability to participate in decision-making processes, to have voices for gender equality in the direction of ICT development, deployment and regulation –from government to industry - is also closely tied to a better understanding of the gender dimensions of ICTs and the availability of sex-disaggregated data on the ICT sector.

The final "C" - control - refers precisely to women's ability to have a voice in the direction of ICT development, deployment, and regulation. There are at least three sets of policy makers that have significant influence on ICT development and require strong gender perspectives and greater participation by women: top management in private sector companies, economic and social development decision-makers, and those concerned with science and technology planning. Policy decisions will be central to determining how ICTs facilitate greater incomes and opportunities for women. Technology choices, infrastructure, pricing and tariffs can be examined and calibrated to make sure that women are not excluded from the benefits of access to ICT.

UNIFEM is committed to ensuring that women, particularly poor women, are not excluded from the benefits of ICTs. We know the cost of exclusion, and it is too high - both for the developing world and for women. Those who remain excluded from the digital revolution will also be excluded from an increasingly globalized and IT-based job, trade and production market, thereby missing out on many possibilities to lift themselves out of poverty, enhance their economic security and contribute to the overall development of their communities, regions and countries. ICTs have the potential to help women increase their productivity and efficiency, building on their existing income-generating activities and enabling them to access new employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in the information economy. Thus ICTs offer not only e-mail, e-commerce and e-jobs, but "E-quality."

This is why we at UNIFEM are working at various levels to close the gender digital divide in the world: in Africa, we have mobilized African ICT entrepreneurs in the Diaspora for technology-transfer programmes to women's organizations and for advocacy; in Jordan, we have partnered with CISCO and the Jordanian government to increase women's access to high-quality IT jobs; we have also launched Arab Women Connect, as part of a regional strategy to increase Arab women's use of and influence on new ICTs.

UNIFEM stands ready to offer more than just calls for gender equality. We are ready to offer expertise and insights that will contribute to a policy and regulatory framework - and a dynamic community of users - that reap the benefits of diverse perspectives and needs, and a commitment to "E-Quality" for all. I call on the international community to establish an "E-Quality" fund, to guarantee that women will have the opportunities and resources they need to shape the digital era.

In closing, I come back to what will bridge the digital divide – intellectual, not only financial capital - because the major barriers are not technological but human - they depend on the political will and commitment of all. The opportunity to break those barriers has come, and it is before us, at the WSIS.

I thank you.