Good morning friends and it is a pleasure to see you all here.
I take this opportunity to invite you all on behalf of the WSIS Gender Caucus –
(WSIS incidentally stands for the World Summit on the Information Society).

We are in the throes of a new epoch- The information age. And even as we all
experience this reality in many ways in our everyday lives, as people who believe in
and are passionate about gender equality, most of us know one thing....

That the wonders of ICTs have not really touched the lives of many many women
and men in ways that make meaning to their lives.

Most of us also feel ambivalent about ICTs and the information era, whether this is
going to be a good deal at all and how it will really work to transform society in ways
that we desire to see change happen.

The skepticism associated with the information society developments is an important
starting point. It serves as the basis for unpacking the why and the how and in
asking the questions that count. At the same time, this skepticism is also a function
of many unknowns and so there is much more that we need to do in making
meaning and ascribing names to what we see now that we do not have preexisting
categories for.

The most important imperatives are to map, from a social justice and equality
standpoint, the new challenges and risks as well as new spaces and opportunities
that the Information Society connotes. We need to move beyond skepticism into
more informed positions. And we need to apply the same ingenuity to interpret the
emerging paradigms of the IS that gender advocacy has always required. We have
argued that roads and electricity have indeed something to do with maternal
mortality (so can we now explore how Internet-related paradigms act as
infrastructure for promoting women's rights); we have understood that collectives
and grassroots groups, as spaces to come together, do indeed impact women's
autonomy (so can we explore how the IS offers new spaces for resistance and for
solidarity); we have argued for greater accountability of public institutions and for
poor women's citizenship rights (so now can we see how public institutions and the
notion of the public domain can itself be transformed by the choices that are
available in the IS?)

Clearly for gender advocates, the challenges are not just about putting telephone
lines and providing Internet connectivity. It is about how we can, at this moment of
tremendous change and great challenges, engage with the discourse at political
levels. And for us, the moment poses an urgency to make the political personal; and
this certainly does not amount to inverting the old feminist logic and exhortation on
its head – not at all; in fact, it is about entering and populating the spaces where
rules are made – so that we are present in all the sites of contestation – in order that
we can ensure that the personal is treated as political and given its due. From a
gender standpoint, our task is manifold...How do we see the political content of the
information society discourse as impinging on gender, and how is gender being
negotiated locally within the larger frameworks being decided at global levels?

A little bit about why we need to think beyond ICTs and at a more macro level of the
IS. The changes that we see in terms of the IS are deeply political –affecting the
relationships between countries, sections of society and between government and
citizen. The emerging paradigms are responsible for new global debates on IP; they

have dramatically altered the possibilities for bottom-up media that communities can have greater control over; they are redefining the public domain and gender relations in the public domain. However, we also know that the larger ecology of the IS context is rife with potent problems - freedoms that we cherish are under grave threat and under the scrutiny and surveillance of governments (the recent clamp down on FM radio in Nepal being just one example), and the invisible hand of market forces is gaining greater control over public policy and institutions through concepts like MSPs and CSR (and here again I refer to the context from south Asia.. Microsoft recently signed a contract with the Indian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in many areas covering education, rural development, egovernance and science and technology.) Obviously, there is more to MSPs than mere philanthropy. The issues in this context obviously concern control over knowledge and more importantly, raise critical questions about the role of the state and its obligations in the information society.

A little about WSIS.

The WSIS is poised at the moment in its final stages of negotiation between governments. The summit will be held at Tunisia between the 15th to the 18th of November. This is the first global UN summit that has been held in 2 stages. The first was held in Geneva in end 2003.

Gender equality advocates, including the WSIS GC has been involved in advocacy efforts towards the summit and the WSIS space has proved to be extremely resistant to progressive gender language, and to public policy and its relevance in shaping agenda in the IS context. The room for politicking with weapons of ideology and ethics is almost nonexistent. The most recent setback to the negotiations has been that Russia has sought to reopen a para that was agreed and closed with an objection to the use of the term "gender digital divide".

And a little about this workshop

This workshop follows both from the GC's commitment and IT for Change's basic approach to involve regional actors. It will examine the connections between gender and the information society, engage with WSIS and what it means for gender and development and explore what is significant for policy and practice. We have made conscious efforts to bring gurus from 2 schools of training – gender activists who are beginning to grapple with IS issues and experts who have for long been involved in gender, media and communications issues. The mix we hope will help broaden the discussions.

This workshop could not have happened but for some old friendships… and I would like to particularly recall our association with UNFEIM and APDIP who have supported our efforts in the region not just as a one-off activity, but in a sustained way over time. Some of the concepts informing this workshop are a direct result of the work that we have done with UNIFEM and APDIP.

We do hope that the tremendous response to this event gets translated into energies for further action. It is obvious that we as advocates of gender equality need to conduct our business at all levels – local, national and global. And this workshop we hope will help that business in small and big ways.