Mapping Gender in the Information Society: From Reality to Discourse

WSIS Gender Caucus, UNDP and IT for Change
In partnership with IDRC and UNIFEM, South Asia

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WORSHOP REPORT
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Background:
The far-reaching and epochal changes to societal institutions that the information society heralds also suggests new challenges and risks as well as new spaces and opportunities. The changes are deeply political – affecting the relationships between countries, sections of society and between government and citizen. From a gender standpoint, what does women's empowerment mean in the context of an information society? How do we see the political content of the information society discourse as impinging on the personal, and how is the personal being redefined locally in the emerging political discourse at global levels?

As women and men who have worked actively for gender equality, we need to examine the notion of empowerment closely in the context of information society frameworks. For instance, the information society is premised on the notion that access to information and communication technology (ICT) is empowering, especially for women.

> *Rather than making blanket claims for the empowering potential of technology, we need to adopt a more nuanced approach - is the use of ICTs empowering to all women or to just a cross section and under what conditions? What are the specific paradigms of the information society that suggest spaces for women's empowerment? The question we need to ask ourselves is what we mean when we say, "ICTs have the potential to empower women."*

To examine the connections between the local and the global and recast the political as personal in these times of change, WSIS Gender Caucus, IT for Change, UNDP Asia Pacific Gender Mainstreaming Programme, UNDP Asia Pacific Development Information Programme in partnership with IDRC and UNIFEM South Asia, organised a one day event that looks at gender in the information society.

Objectives:

This workshop was geared towards:
1. Taking stock of where we stand with respect to understanding the complex relations between gender and technology.
2. Critically evaluating how global forums such as the World Summit on the Information Society have framed issues related to gender and information and communications technologies.

3. Articulating the concerns that need greater attention at policy and action levels.

The workshop created a space for wider participation of women in debates centered on the Information Society and provided us with deep and significant insights coming from local and regionally specific analysis.

The **first session**, __Assessing Women's Empowerment in the Information Society – presentation of research__, comprised presentation of findings from the Asia Pacific Regional Research supported by WSIS-GC and IDRC and coordinated by IT for Change. This research project looks at gender in the information society (IS) through an analytical framework that maps issues of identity, control over technology, collective action and institutional transformation.

The presenters included Prof. Deborah Wheeler, Dept. of Political Science, US Naval Academy, (on the West Asia perspective), Angela Kuga Thas, APC-WNSP (on the East Asia perspective), Mridula Swamy, IT for Change, (on the South Asia perspective) and Vanessa Griffin (on behalf of Sharon Bhagwan Rolls on the Pacific perspective). The session was chaired by Dr. Eun-Ju Kim, Senior Advisor for Asia and the Pacific, ITU.

The broad themes that emerged from the presentations were:

Identity

Women personalise their access in terms of transformation of self, ICTs for them are means by which they can interact with a community locally and globally, mobilise support for campaign for gaining voting rights and political rights and in this sense ICTs are tools for bringing about formal institutional political changes. ICTs do not replace social ties, instead they enhance existing familial communications patterns and women in West Asia are using it to maintain family ties, support traditional roles that they play and also as a means to bring about changes within the traditional roles.

Access and ownership

- More attention has been paid to issues of technology development and application without suitably designing supporting policies and substantive programmes which would encourage women's active participation, ownership and decision-making.

- Gender equality is limited to the misconception of equal numbers of women and men benefiting from a project or programme. This is too simplistic an approach as it does not critically look at the processes of socialization and the resulting power imbalances and how these inequalities manifest in power dynamics, disempowerment and impoverishment. It does not take into account distribution of resources and opportunities. Gender equality demands honesty in examining how masculinity and femininity become and remain borders and restrictions on our being and well-being. If we take in its full context, its implications and the consequence of those implications, it becomes clearer that gender equality cannot be achieved if we do not centre our efforts on empowering women.

- If gender equality is at all to be achieved policies, programmes and legislation must be designed from a gender perspective with women's empowerment as the pivotal core. Such policies, programmes and legislation though may only prove to be successfully pushed from within the institutional framework of the State, guided by human rights principles.

- Women are not in the discussion, at least at the national level, as stakeholders, policy developments are happening nationally and regionally with very little inputs on issues which are taken for granted as being raised and discussed. In some regions like that

  Pacific there is a sense of being imposed upon where the technology will definitely not be locally owned or they may be state owned.

Achieving gender equality is not as simple as providing some basic ICT skills and providing access to ICTs. Programmes, no matter how well-intentioned, will not be able to bring about permanent change as resources run out and nothing is left to further persuade and sustain initial efforts. More thought, effort and resources need to put in place in order to ensure women's self-empowerment, as this internalization of empowerment is the real sustainable driving force towards change.

The **second session** involved **a response to the research finding** by Cecilia Ng, Women's Development Collective (Malaysia), Yvonne Underhill-Sem, DAWN (Pacific Islands) and Kalyani Menon Sen, Jagori (India). The session was chaired by Sunita Dhar, UNIFEM, South Asia

They pointed out that the research papers revealed moving away from deterministic notions that technology shapes society to a view that recognises a mutual shaping where society also shapes technology (the sociology of technology perspective). However, what is needed is to contextualize ICTs and society in a global environment (such as neo-liberal markets and global capitalism) which creates differential levels in access; at a national level looking at state policies related to telecommunications, media, cyber-law which determine the nature of access to technology, how technology diffuses within a region, who control it and the local level where existing power structures will mediate design development, and deployment of technology.

It is on the basis of this understanding that the research should frame, how technology can or cannot empower women and elucidate the indicators for empowerment. In other words for instance with respect to identity, the questions we need to ask are how do women negotiate new found identity and power relations through new ICTs, whose knowledge are we talking about, where are women's bodies in these debates? We need to analyse women's bodies as means of commerce on the internet only then can question be raised about who benefits and who is violated by technology. We have to talk today more about the rights of the person whose virtual body is being violated rather than the product (pornography).

When it comes to access and control we need to look more closely at the new economic opportunities women find themselves in, how much control do electronic workers who produce hardware have over the technology they are actually building? How much control do we have in terms of our relationship with technology as consumers? There is a need to restructure our analysis of labour and labour rights, workers as production units, workers as agents for change and promoters and home based work. Do we really understand our neo-liberal economies, the discourse and its mutations? Where women are situated in what ways ICTs are changing, shifting and enhancing the diverse ways in which labour is being organized? What are the complex gendered arrangements that are emerging? How is the distinction between what is a public vs. private space being played out? Only when we start exploring these can we better understand how technology enables these labour arrangements.

Only when there is a clearer understanding about some of the issues and the debates can we talk about strategies and plans of action – community media, internet governance, training modules, dialoging with governments, institutional transformation.

> *There is therefore a disconnect between ICTs and those in the women's movement where we are not looking beyond the mere use of technology to see how it intersects with other issues over and above economic issues such as campaigns against domestic violence, or demanding better prices for products and linking up to the global level. This became a recurring theme throughout the workshop. The need of the hour is for a more micro-macro global picture and a clear stance on where both the IT people and women's movement want to enter this picture.*

The **post-lunch sessions** began with taking a look at experiences from grassroots projects. Titled **From Alternate to New paradigms: What do voices from the grassroots say?** The presentations brought together the successes and struggles of initiatives that have explored and deployed new media and information and communication technologies for women's advancement and social change.

The presenters included, Raijeli Nicole, ISIS International, Philippines, on Media Initiatives From Asia-Pacific; Shoba Arun, Manchester Metropolitan University; and Aruna Sundararajan, Global E-schools and Communities Initiative. The session was chaired by Fatima Almana, UNESCWA, Lebanon.

This session highlighted that in some sense there is a disconnect between the excessive focus, at global forums like WSIS, on ICTs at the expense of community based media which are actually being used by women at the grassroots. Another issue that is often ignored is the importance of an enabling environment for ICTD projects. Such an environment is one where poverty alleviation strategies are mainstreamed with the use of ICT in order to achieve their goals, based on public – private partnerships where civil society and management and educational institutions along with governments have a role to play, the presence of polices that do not create disincentives for last mile connectivity, investment in the development of low cost devices to enable last mile connectivity and finally policies that are inclusive in its design and encourage local ownership.

Moving from the grassroots to the global arena the next session, **'Mapping the Information Society Discourse – What does WSIS mean for gender**, flagged issues that have been central to the WSIS negotiations and examined them from a gender perspective. It linked issues like Internet governance, financing and WSIS follow-up with "older" debates in women's rights and sustainable development and global geo-politics with the gender and development discourse with particular reference to WSIS and information society issues.

The presenters included, Anita Gurumurthy, IT for Change; Gigi Francesco, DAWN and Lynn Muthoni Wanyeki, FEMNET Africa. The session was chaired by Farida Shaheed, Shirkat Gah, Pakistan.

Critiquing the WSIS process the presenters pointed out that an emphasis on Internet Governance and its high visibility at WSIS has tended to take the focus away from the important issues of exploring how the internet offers new paradigms for development. The dominance of

academicians, technologists with social passion, and some rights groups at the WSIS has squeezed out development concerns in the context of the information society, most important to the South. In addition, most governments and civil society actors, at least those from Asia Pacific, have seen WSIS as more of a technology and infrastructure related process, as a result, core development issues of equity and social justice including gender equality have been even more difficult to articulate and defend than at other UN events.

> *To bring the focus back to development the internet needs to be seen as a public provision and connectivity treated as a public service.*

Looking at WSIS from another angle, presenters focused on why activists and development practitioners continue to engage or should continue to engage in WSIS and related forums. This is because such institutional sites at global level are used for the consolidation of power and wealth by those who are currently benefiting from the unequal system of accumulation. Second, the new global agreements are putting in place new norms for participation in such forums and these are norms not just about who is included in global negotiations but about who are excluded and new modalities for negotiations. Therefore there is a need to know what are these emerging norms and processes and how are they really treating civil society as it raises issue related to the legitimacy of participation in such forums and significantly impacts whether the voice of civil society gets heard at all.

Turning the focus to the WSIS – Gender Caucus as a case study to illustrate how complex the issue of participation is, presenters eluded to at least four movements/constituencies that try to articulate both feminist and women's concerns at WSIS and their different ways of looking at the Information Society. These four constituencies include:

1) Women who work within ICTs and telecomm related issues --- articulating concerns around women's access to ICTs as a tool and women's use of ICTs for social, economic and political empowerment

2) Women who work in media and in the arts as cultural producers --- articulating concerns over women's representation in media with the Internet as another media platform, contestation over pornography.

3) Women who have worked in, broadly, the Communications for social change, Development Communication and Participatory Communication movements such as community radio, theater, video who have seen the value that information brings to development and social change --- articulating that the focus should not be on content alone but participation and what women's participation brings in terms of women's organizing at the local level and finally

4) Women who work in the human rights area --- articulating women's particular experiences in violations of freedom of expression.

A common critique applicable to all these movements is their inability to move to the question of control over ICTs and real benefits and uses of these resources.

Presenters emphasized the need for civil society groups to analyze:

1. How have they participated, the effectiveness of that participation and how the learning can be translated to the work being done in dealing with the dominance of the ideology of the WTO where the neo-liberal frameworks are explicit and accepted as compared with other UN process where there are implicit.

2. How can civil society enable debate of depth and rigor to find resolution to these differences in the contradictory positions held by different constituents and how to enable progress on the advocacy demands emerging from each of these constituencies and movements that are not at the expense of others?

The **final session** for the day, "**Articulating gender concerns in the information society"** comprised a reflection by two commentators on the day's proceedings and what the discussions signal for women's empowerment in the Information Society. They flagged key mandates for different actors, with a focus on the shape that the information society is taking in the Asia Pacific region and the challenges and opportunities it contains for gender equality.

The presenters included Shireen Huq, DANIDA Bangladesh and Vivienne Wee, City University of Hong Kong, the session was chaired by Anita Gurumurthy, IT for Change.

> *In today's world we need to look at ICTs as a technology of governance and as a technology of governance, it is part of larger technologies of governance that have long existed (railways, electricity, telecommunications to name a few). No matter what technology of governance we talk about women are not controlling any of them. However, ICTs are more than just tools of governance. They are also tools of subversion, reform, and revolution and so it becomes even more significant that women are not in control of this technology.*

The standard access and control frameworks and the value of international norms and standard settings in the context of ICTs beg for entry points for women's movements engagement. Since it borders on the traditional unease of women activists on where one draws the lines between censorship, for example, freedom of expression and freedom of information and does one create weapons that attack us.

Coupled with the inherent skepticism resulting from the lack of clarity of intervention for feminists in the opportunities and challenges offered by ICTs, the 'invisibilisation' of women's organisations and movements situated outside the internet, and hence the invisibility of their struggles, knowledge, and existence, calls for:

- An enhanced role of intermediary organizations/ groups working with such 'invisible' grass root women bodies
- The need to reinvent strategies in the face of technology induced change in the 'terrain' of the feminist movement
- The need to recognise the critical juncture of reinventing strategies and creating alternatives for the feminist movement to tackle the myriad issues of access, content, relevance, bias, stereotyping, problems related to pornography, trade and women's bodies which though existed "pre" IT and the internet, but are now being mapped onto the Information Society driven by innovations in ICTs

In today's world ICTs must be seen as a technology of governance and as a technology of governance, it is part of larger technologies of governance that have long existed (railways, electricity, telecommunications to name a few). No matter what technology of governance we talk about women are not controlling any of them. However, ICTs are more than just tools of governance. They are also tools of subversion, reform, and revolution and so it becomes even more significant when women are not in control of this technology.

The concluding remarks underscored that one of the central issues in the information age is that of global governance in a world of multi-dimensional complexities where there is no longer clear distinction between the North and the South.

Gender dimensions must be conceptualized in the context of all these complexities. The struggle is taking place at another level as well that of re-distribution of wealth and power as the uneven distribution and the use of this technology results in the uneven distribution of resources. And so it is not enough to engage with the internet alone. The engagement should be with the digitization of information as beginning from plotting the human genome to doing aerial mapping using the satellite all is done digitally.

The workshop concluded with Anita Gurumurthy, on behalf of the WSIS Gender Caucus, IT for Change, UNDP Asia Pacific Gender Mainstreaming Programme, UNDP Asia Pacific Development Information Programme, IDRC and UNIFEM South Asia, thanking the participants and the speakers for their active participation.

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