

Working for gender and equality in the world information society

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The following statement was made by Joanne Sandler, Deputy Director for Programmes, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to the Preparatory Committee of the World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 1-5 July 2002.

UNIFEM

On behalf of UNIFEM, the women's fund of the United Nations, and Noeleen Heyzer, its Executive Director, we express our appreciation for the opportunity to address this first session of the preparatory meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society. We are particularly pleased to join you at the inception of this process, and hope you will see UNIFEM as a resource as the planning moves forward.

UNIFEM has prioritised issues and opportunities embodied in the WSIS agenda in response to the groundswell of interest and energy from women around the world to be part of the Information Society.

We are here because of a woman named Gladys from Southern Africa. Gladys is a teacher at an all-girls school and the co-founder of a crafts centre employing 33 women in her village, each shareholders as well as workers. When the centre's tourist trade diminished because of the political situation in the area, Gladys was able to find new markets in the Netherlands when she was trained in e-commerce in a UNIFEM-sponsored project.

We are here because of a woman named Aisha from South Asia. Aisha had an opportunity to draft legislation to introduce protection orders for women survivors of domestic violence in her country. She was able to incorporate lessons learned from countries worldwide when she participated in our electronic discussion on ending gender-based violence. 2,500 activists to end violence against women, including over 40% from developing countries, participate in this list, started with funds from the World Bank. The participants in offer a shining example of what is possible in the Information Society.

We are here because achieving the Millennium Development Goals will be impossible if women are excluded from the sectors of society that are generating the greatest opportunities. If we use ICTs strategically, the acronym - MDGs - could also stand for 'Making Development Gender Sensitive'.

We come to this Preparatory Committee meeting with a simple message. Take gender and women's rights into account as you are developing a vision and deliberating issues of access and applications. Almost every country in the world has already committed to this by agreeing to the Beijing Platform for Action. More than 165 governments agreed to equality between men and women by signing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). At this PrepCom, we have the opportunity to connect the path toward equality that emerged from Beijing, with the vision for global connections and knowledge-sharing that could emerge from this process.

Making a difference

While we look at the new opportunities inherent in the internet, videoconferencing and other wireless and electronic technologies, we should not lose sight of the continuing value of radio, video and other more traditional technologies to women. Based on collective experiences and

agendas that have emerged from women's organizing around information and communications issues, we would highlight three areas that the World Summit could focus on to make a difference in women's lives and in national development.

First, ensure women's participation and gender analysis in shaping the regulatory and policy frameworks that govern ICTs. How can we bring gender equality into cyberspace? We need gender analysis of telecommunications policies in every country. We need data disaggregated by sex and qualitative assessments on the use of ICTs to understand how to shape policies to ensure equal access for women and girls. We need to have more women on boards of directors and as CEOs of information technology companies. We need to have strategies that encourage and support girls to study math and science and more women in policy-making decisions in ministries of telecommunications. We know that many countries are undertaking e-readiness surveys focused on policy. We would assert that e-quality and e-readiness go hand in hand.

Second, invest in innovative capacity-building strategies to ensure that women and girls - particularly those who are marginalized and poor - can shape the digital future and generate content that is relevant to their interests. As the main providers of unpaid care work in families and communities, women and girls face serious constraints on their time, mobility and access to financial resources and technology infrastructure. Where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is destroying families and communities, it is girls who are being pulled out of school, and who need specially-designed opportunities to make sure that they can benefit from the possibilities offered by ICTs. In countries in conflict, as well as in post-conflict and refugee situations, ICTs offer possibilities of linking women and girls to options and opportunities that war has destroyed.

While women and girls have onerous demands on their time and suffer disproportionately the constraints arising from HIV/AIDS, conflict, illiteracy and poverty, they will go to great lengths to enable change for their families and communities. If ICTs offer a more effective way of generating income, securing education and training, and getting critical information related to health and well-being, women will find time to incorporate these into their lives. ICTs can facilitate life-long learning for women if the right policies and partnerships are in place.

The private sector has a key role to play here. This is what we are trying to do in Jordan, in a partnership that involves Cisco Systems, the Cisco Foundation, the Government of Jordan, UNDP and UNRWA. The project has designed women-specific Cisco Networking Academy Programmes, and, in 2001, facilitated the creation of Cisco labs and a curriculum targeting young women in 10 institutions in Jordan. This project is an example of what broad-based partnerships between government, the private sector, NGOs and the UN can achieve.

Finally, ensure that social responsibility and gender justice inform all ICT strategies and programmes. While the digital divide threatens to increase inequalities between rich and poor - including rich and poor women - the gender digital divide threatens to increase inequalities between men and women. Those who have benefited from the digital revolution can take a lead in bringing others along.

Social responsibility and gender justice are at the heart of a new partnership that UNIFEM launched this year. Called Africans in the Digital Diaspora, the objective of the partnership is to link successful African IT entrepreneurs on the continent and in the Diaspora with fledgling women's microenterprise programmes in Africa. A core group of African IT entrepreneurs have already committed to leading this programme, which will involve networking, mentoring, and undertaking pilot projects and partnerships supported by the private sector and private foundations.

Gender equality is a goal. ICTs can be a powerful vehicle for achieving that goal and other Millennium Development Goals. That is why we signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ITU and UNDP, to promote opportunities to bring telecommunications, development and gender equality together.

UNIFEM, our partners, and scores of gender advocates worldwide are 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 thank you for your attention and wish you the best of luck in your deliberations.

<http://www.unifem.undp.org/index.html>

<http://www.itu.int/ws/is/>