



Asian Forum on Information and Communication Technology Policies and e-Strategies

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Keynote Address

by



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Asian Women in the Digital Economy: Policies for Participation

Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen

Permit me to begin by stating women make up to 70 per cent of the world's poor. Although it is without a doubt that global leaders acknowledge and have made concrete efforts to address this, I will put forth today that the challenge to address the participation of women in the economic, social, political and digital realm leaves much to be desired/ done.

Let us step back for a moment, while the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights provides a glimpse on the equal status of women, today's realities of adoption, diffusion and utilization of Information and Communication Technology among women reveals the daunting task that faces every one of us in ensuring that the creation of the Information Society and the subsequent knowledge based economies, does not exclude the needs, interests, and demands of women to participate in the digital world.

The advances taking place in the field of ICT has been widely documented. The benefits arising from innovative technological solutions, products and services have transformed and opened up new avenues for governments, private sector, and civil society to work together to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable human development, accelerate economic growth, increase the efficiency of government services and facilitate a nation's integration into the global economy. Technological convergence taking place in the ICT field have also opened numerous possibilities that are rapidly transforming the way we work, live, play, and most importantly - the way we relate to one another. I believe, all this and more provides us hope and a fighting chance of creating a better world, especially to address poverty alleviation and human development among women.

It is the very characteristic of new technologies that favours no geographical space, social class, economic background, education achievement, age, gender and political affiliations, wherein lies their greatest strength. It is within this vein of optimism on how ICT can transform the social, economic and political realm, that it is imperative for us to re-visit the core issue of

the substantive, equal and dynamic participation of women in the digital economy especially since in many parts of Asia, women are under-represented and under-served in terms of economic and social development. Exclusion from the rapidly evolving digital economy will place women in worse off circumstances.

While the ICT and Gender mantra that we often come across are common to most developmental policies and national strategies, it is important at times to analyze the root of why often national policies fail to adequately address, encourage and enable the participation of women.

For starters, a quick look around this room of high level delegations representing governments, private sector and international development agencies who are concerned about the creation of an equitable Information Society and we will be aware of the first challenge ...of equitable participation of women at the highest level of decision making. Hence, the role of policy making to correct this situation cannot be underestimated nor underemphasized.

According UN statistics, representation of women at the highest levels of national and international decision-making has not changed in the five years since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Women continue to be in the minority in national parliaments, with an average of 13 per cent worldwide in 1999, despite the fact that women comprise the majority of the electorate in almost all countries.

Inherently there are two critical areas that pose a problem to enhance the participation of women in the digital economy, the first being that the policy-making process on national ICT strategies does not allow the incorporation of women's views. Secondly, there continues to be a tendency for policy makers to treat ICT policies and strategies as gender neutral. Technology is gender neutral, policies are not.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

A male colleague of mine told me the other day that the best we can do in the present climate of social, economic and political bias towards women is to ensure the gender sensitization of men. While I agree to that approach only partially, I would also like to emphasize the importance of ensuring that gender empowerment does not fall into a trap of merely facilitating access to information and the Internet for women. The true task that faces all policy makers is to ensure that we are able to capitalize and leverage on the capabilities that ICT offers to address national needs, achieve the Millennium Development Goals and in essence change the socio-economic fabric of how our societies are structured. That is the true challenge. While some might argue that to get to that noble goal, we need to ensure that

women have access to ICT, I am putting forth that while it is imperative that we undertake such efforts, it is merely the starting point of where we need to go.

So where do we go from here, you might ask? In what direction, can we substantively incorporate and mainstream gender concerns within our national ICT policies and strategies? Well, my personal approach has always been to advocate for three key objectives, namely; equitable access, increased literacy and sustainable opportunities, with one singular goal in mind, empowerment of women and equitable facilitation of human development among women.

Equitable Access

The issue of information and access to global knowledge and ICT skills must be considered in tandem with basic needs of women in society. It is without a doubt that while ICTs can provide information and avenues to improve the conditions of many rural populations, social and economic dynamics have to be taken into consideration. Fundamentally, technology acquisition is not gender neutral as inequities such as illiteracy continues to be a major factor that hinders the participation of women the digital economy.

Increased Literacy

While we are talking about ICT literacy, let me just share a quick fact, women comprise 64% of the 876 million illiterate adults globally. While we would like to ensure that women are part of the global information society, we cannot run from the face of reality that in essence women are beginning on an unequal platform as they more likely than men, lack basic skills, which would enable them to take advantage of ICT technologies.

Sustainable economic opportunities

While it is ideal for us to espouse an environment where women are equipped with skills to prepare them for a diverse range of roles as users of ICT, creators and designers of application and managers. It is important to expand this perception further to focus on the development of business skills to enable women to actively participate via leveraging on the capacities that inherently mark the distinctive nature of the information economy from the traditional labour intensive industries, namely the access, acquisition and application of and knowledge skills.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Permit me to share my thoughts on the way forward.

Firstly, on Policy Making Processes - We need to ensure that women have equal rights to be a part of decision-making processes which affect them directly or indirectly, and influence these decision in a manner which best improves their conditions and the quality of lives. In the

formulation of ICT policies and strategies and private arena, we need to encourage the participation and representation of women at the policy levels and within the industry. Ultimately, we should aim to develop a more equitable representation, not only in terms of ratios but also in terms of responsibilities and authority. This “engendered” participation at a high level of decision-making will ensure that women are no longer subjected to be passive consumers of services offered to them but rather enable women to play a decisive role in deciding the kind of services they want and the structures and strategies which could best address the needs of women in society and community. We should actively seek out and identify key women players in government and the private sector as role models as well have a database pool of women ICT experts that we could expand upon to facilitate the sharing of experiences and knowledge.

Secondly, within the private sector, not merely the ICT sector, the benefits of teleworking must be emphasized. A global integrated economy is fundamentally relying on networking technologies. It is within this realm that we should explore means to encourage and enable women to play a role in the global economy. The advent of networking technologies has led to a huge outsourcing industry and these include remote processing jobs such as call centers, data conversion, medical transcription, back office operations, content development, deposition summary, insurance claims processing, geographical information systems and web design.

In essence, the term Teleworking should be expanded. Teleworking in reality, offers numerous possibilities where women can work from home and provide for children at the same time. I am not advocating that we keep to traditional stereotypes of women as homemakers and as such could earn a side income, but working from an understanding that there are constraints posed by social dynamics that could be addressed via these means. The development of such distance-working opportunities can provide women with new ways to be incorporated into the global work force, and should continue to be supported.

Indirectly it provides them with the necessary skills and knowledge on the demands of the workplace as well as provide them with additional skills when they do decide to pursue a full time position in the industry. Teleworking and outsourcing opportunities also provide opportunities to mobilize involvement of women in rural areas, in addition to steering work opportunities to flow from developed countries to developing countries. It is understated on how work opportunities actually changes the dynamics of power relationship between women and men in families and communities for the better as empowerment actually entails a greater sense of financial independence and self-esteem.

Thirdly, national policies and strategies have to consciously and concretely address the building of capacities and literacy among women. Governments should work together with all stakeholders, the private sector, academic institutions, media and civil society to strengthen women's ICT literacy and development of skills. Mobilizing resources to support women's education and training is critical in all of the efforts to move forward.

IN CONCLUSION, I would like to re-emphasize four points that underscores the creation of appropriate national policies and strategies to enhance, encourage and strengthen the active and successful participation of women in the digital economy.

Firstly, empowerment. We need to ensure that we are able to expand the capabilities, choices and opportunities for women by providing them with an impartial and empowering avenue to participate in, and to endorse, decision-making processes that affect their involvement in the digital economy.

Secondly, co-operation – the daunting task ahead requires all stakeholders to play an active and substantial role in ensuring the strengthening of capacities of women and providing an enabling environment to foster and build upon the capacities of the women.

Thirdly, equity - the expansion of capabilities and opportunities of women in the workforce will ultimately generate a greater degree of economic growth within a nation. This also will lead to an increased number of income generating opportunities for women and enabling an increase share of financial resources available to women to pursue choices and options to develop their lives and capacities.

In closing, in view of the drafting of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration tomorrow, I would like to call upon all present here to rise to the challenge and demonstrate your leadership, vision, and commitment in ensuring national policies and strategies enhance the participation of women thus avoiding exclusion from the digital economy

Thank you very much.