

United Nations
Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
Expert Group Meeting on
Equal participation of women and men in
decision-making processes, with particular
emphasis on political participation and leadership
24 to 27 October 2005

**Creating an Outer Circle in the Digital World:
Participation of Women in the e-Government System**

Prepared by:

Dr. Baharul Islam
Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Creating an Outer Circle in the Digital World: Participation of Women in the e-Government System¹

Dr Baharul Islam
Development Information Services Division
UN Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa
Email: islamb@un.org, drbahar@gmail.com

Introduction

"The so-called digital divide is actually several gaps in one...There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike."

*Kofi Annan
United Nations Secretary-General
Statement to the World Summit on the Information Society,
Geneva, 10 December 2003*

Policy statements and ideal principles incorporating gender dimensions need support from various sectors of the society to turn them into practical utilities. Despite the constitutional obligations and policy declarations, it is often found that gender equality and women's participation get a low priority in our institutions and they fail to raise awareness and bring any change in behaviour and institutional practice². In national ICT policies (referred as NICI Policy under AISI Framework), the situation attains greater concern and significance as socio-economic and cultural barriers and individual perceptions of one's role makes women to remain within the prescribed 'role' even in an otherwise level playing fields. In the ICT arena, for instance, they still remain inside that outer circle of ICT users where a male-dominated society assigns specific limits beyond which women are not able to tread. Women, like other subordinate groups in the society are thought to be "muted"³.

¹The paper reflects the works of the Development Information Services Division of UNECA to develop gender-sensitive ICT policies in African Countries. This paper specifically draws on the authors work in The Gambia and Sierra Leone to formulate National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) Policies and Plans. Visit <http://www.uneca.org/aisi>

² Dufour, B. (1990), Ed. *The New Social Curriculum: A guide to cross-cultural issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Frank, F. W. & P. A. Treichler, (1978). *Language, Gender and Professional Writing*. New York: Modern Language Association.

It is, therefore, very clear that due to the pressure of prevalent social contexts it often becomes very difficult to initiate even a different view of 'value systems' as it operates in a classroom as well as in the perceptions of a student at a given time. To incorporate the gender equity and women's agenda in the ICT policies, we must therefore, break the silence first and sensitize our women and the society in general about the issues. This will create a catalytic environment in the ICT arena overriding the exclusion-inclusion syndrome that ails our current digital power relations today.

Paradigm Shift in Gender & Development

A quick review of the various shifts in paradigms of development since 1950s will show us that over the years concepts of development has changed and such changes also affected the our view of the role of women in developmental efforts. While the earliest development theory of 'modernisation' or 'dual economy' model took a welfare approach to women as the indirect beneficiaries of developmental process whereas the by 1970s when the modernisation theory was in decline, the focus shifted to the human resource development approach with women recognised for their productive roles in the economy (Snyder and Tadesse, 1995). As the human resource development approach came into limelight and sustained demand for equity and elimination of discrimination against women took ground that led to equity and human rights based approach in development. It focused on inequality between men and women in society and aimed at securing a better quality life for both (*Ibid*). During the same period while developmental programmes were targeting 'basic needs' and removal of absolute poverty, women came into focus again. Various income generation and entrepreneurship projects were launched with women as prime beneficiaries.

The latest in these paradigms is the empowerment and gender approach to the role of women in development. It initiated in the mid 1980s and it has an inclusive element so as not to segregate women's development issue from the development of the society as a whole. Groups like Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) advocated developmental policies for the whole society from women's perspective rather than exclusive agendas for women alone (Sen and Grown, 1987). Within the domain of empowerment, this approach is included the freedom of individuals and societies to take their own development decisions in their respective social, economic and political contexts. The approach emphasized participation of women in the process to create self-reliance (Snyder and Tadesse, 1995).

In the same generation of development debate, the term gender came to replace the concept of women in development. The term was broader in its encompassing as it does not looks at development of 'women' only rather at both men and women as integral part of the same society and therefore, partners in development. Writers like Oakley (1972) and Rubin (1975) shifted the focus from biological differences between men and women in terms of *sex* to the societal relationship highlighting the obvious suppression the latter by the former. According to Oakley (1972: 158):

‘Sex’ is a biological term: ‘gender’ a psychological and cultural one. Common sense suggests that they are merely two ways of looking at the same division and that someone who belongs to, say, the female sex will automatically belong to the corresponding (feminine) gender. In reality this is not so. To be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality as it is of possessing a particular set of genitals.

Gender and Development (GAD) approach, in contrast to the Women in Development (WID), thus focus primarily on the issue of inequality between men and women and advocates empowerment of women to achieve equality (Moser, 1993). In this paper, the women rights education has been studied from this broad GAD angle but specifically taking into account the specific issues concerning women.

Women and ICT: Making of an Outer Circle

There is no denying the fact that ICT is a powerful tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. An emerging gap between men and women has been identified with a lower number of women accessing and using ICT compared with men⁴. This what we may call the making of an outer circle within the digital world. Of course, within that outer circle women are not alone as they co-habit with the poor, disadvantaged and the rural people. It is increasingly being clear that unless the gender divide within the ‘digitised’ world is not attended immediately both at the policy making and implementation levels, ICT may further widen the gender inequality in the information society.

The emergence of electronic-government (e-Government) and delivery of services online and the interactive nature of the government to citizens (G2C) communication through internet has virtually opened a new perspective on women’s participation in decision making process. The physical presence in the government bodies (e.g. through legislative organs) is now being replaced by an ‘online’ participatory process. This offers a new realm of opportunities for greater participation on one hand but increases the fear of less participation due to inequality in access and affordability of online systems by the women.

The development of a national ICT policy (called NICI policy) for The Gambia, therefore, provided an opportunity to deliberate on the goals of country’s development efforts specifically those aimed at gender mainstreaming as well as the efficiency and transparency of its administrative structures, institutions and strategies. This collective reflection led to a road map from poverty alleviation to gender equality objectives synthesised with the ICT policy and plans.

⁴ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2005). *Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women through ICT*. NY; 2005. Available from www.un.org/womenwatch/daw

Participation of Women in Virtual Decision Making Systems

The e-Government Strategy and the NICI Policy of The Gambia contains a number of items that covers the gender objectives and tries to support those goals through ICT led plans of action. The gender imbalance is very much evident as the mean number of female personnel specialized in ICT is less than half of their male counterparts. The Gambian women in general are disadvantaged in socio-economic and political arenas and this is also reflected in their minimal presence in ICT driven professions. It is, therefore, very crucial to address this particular issue while moving towards a gender-balanced information society in this country through proper human resources development initiatives in ICT.

However, it is observed that a number of social, cultural, religious or other factors positively or negatively affect the adoption and diffusion of ICT. For instance, certain cultural or religious practices may prevent women to leverage the benefits of ICT as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, potential linkages between different sectors of the economy focusing on cross-sectoral issues will help us to forestall potential problems in this regard. The following extract from the draft policy illustrates some of these major initiatives that proposed for next five years.

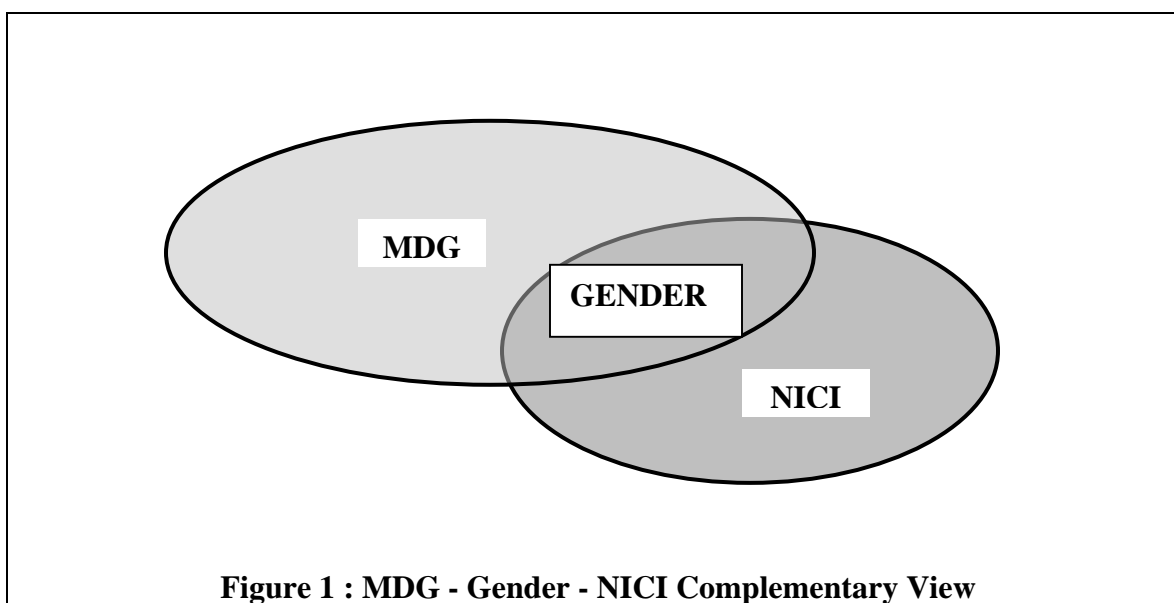
Gender Objective	NICI Policy & Plans
1. Enhancing the Productive Capacity of the Poor.	
a. Promoting labour-saving devices for Women.	Rural Multimedia Centres for Women
b. Providing Access to Credit.	Credit / Loan Opportunities Information online
c. Re-organising Agricultural R&D to encourage labour intensive agriculture and development of small ruminants.	Agricultural Information Systems for rural community information centres
Enhancing Access to and the Performance of Social Services.	
a. Expanding access to Basic Social Services in Rural Areas.	Launching e-Government Initiatives / providing access at local area councils
b. Delivering responsive social programs to the poor.	
c. Enhancing sustainability and quality of social services.	
Local Level Capacity Building.	
a. A Political and Legislative framework for decentralisation.	Local Government Leadership Training for LG representatives
b. Empowerment of Local Government Authorities to assume Decentralised responsibilities.	

Table Contd..

Gender Objective	NICI Policy & Plans
Promoting Participatory Communications Processes.	
a. Enhancing Participation beyond Consultation.	Planning Feedback / Local Govt Representative Links up to the National Assembly level
b. Addressing Gender at National and Local Levels.	Women Bureau's Rural Multimedia Centres as the participatory hub/link to the national development processes /programs.
c. Institutionalising Dialogue between Government, Civil Society and Donors.	NGO / CSO links through NGO associations (eg. TAGNO, Action Aid in The Gambia)

Reinforcing Millennium Development Goals

As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) influence the NICI policy & plans, the gender-oriented activities are in turn envisaged to be guided by the ICT led initiatives outlined in the NICI policy. It's a complementary process intermingled with the overall direction towards achieving the MDGs. In a graphic illustration (Figure:1) the areas where both MDGs and NICI objectives complement each other may be marked as a common priority area of gender mainstreaming.



Further, the MDGs and their timely attainment constituted a benchmark for the development initiatives in The Gambia. While developing the NICI policy and plans the goals for the sustainable human development were taken care of by mainstreaming ICT

led action plans against each of the MDG goals. Poverty reduction is at the root of the human development efforts and this has been incorporated in the NICI policy and plans through attending the PRSP objectives as illustrated above. The other MDGs like universal primary education have been seen as a 'social interaction' dimension of development and as such ICT are intended to be used as a tool for more efficient and cost-effective channel of teacher training specially through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, multimedia instructions as well as for educational planning and administration (e.g. EMIS)⁵. The prevalent bias in educational opportunities towards urban and male population in Africa can well be minimized through judicious use of appropriate ICT tools for delivery of knowledge and information at the doorsteps of the rural and marginalized sections (women / Youth) of the society. That brings us to another prime MDG: gender equality and empowerment of women. The most prominent obstacle to the women's access to knowledge and information leading to the limited opportunities for their economic upliftment is their restricted mobility. With access to ICT facilities these women can overcome both physical and socio-cultural distance and increase their capacity for income generation. The recently opened Rural Multimedia Centers for Women in The Gambia under the auspices of the Women's Bureau is an early fruit of the NICI Plan. More such centers are going to come up in near future. Social service delivery aspects of the other MDGs focusing on reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease

The gender disparity is more prominent in poverty reduction initiatives. ICT can play a vital role in meeting this challenge. Cycle of seclusion of women should be broken with rural women joining their counterparts in the city in sharing their experience, problems and seeking solutions from lessons learnt elsewhere. An illustrative area of ICT initiatives aimed at bridging the gender disparity is helping African business women by providing information for (and on) women entrepreneurs. The online service of Entrepreneurship Development Facility⁶ for Women launched in Addis Ababa in July 2004 provides the much needed support to empower women entrepreneurs to handle their business more efficiently. Similar one-stop website for women entrepreneurs is required to provide women with necessary business related information.

Conclusion

Based on the e-Government Strategy for country The Gambia aims to set up Internet Cafe, throughout the country to ensure the dissemination of the National Women's Policy on the Advancement of Gambian Women, to the public through a website. It will be a website that will enhance access to information on Gender Issues. The policy further ensures that all media programmes that are gender related are frequently reviewed and updated to fill any Information gap. These Internet café's (launched this year) makes ICT accessible and affordable to Gambian Women and they are user-friendly for the grassroots women, especially for those who are illiterates. They also serves as centers to

⁵ Education Management Information System

⁶ Koki, Paule Assoumou, Presentation on "Women Entrepreneur's access to the Information Society" at Accra Regional Conference on WSIS, Feb 2005. Further Visit www.edf-rifed.com

train grassroots women, especially the National Women's Councilors, who are engaged in development, to operate the ICT equipment. In the process they raise the level of awareness on the role, use, application and potential of ICT in Gender empowerment. Further, the rural centers will be extended as ICT training centers at local level to train women entrepreneurs in the use ICT.

However, a number of challenges have been identified on the way to establish such centers. Availability of resources (Human, material and finance), low level of literacy among women, especially at the grassroots, requiring that literacy and numeric skills be developed initially before training them on ICT, high cost of infrastructure, shortage of electricity in the rural areas are a few of them.

Conclusion:

Equal participation of men and women in decision-making processes in the emerging information society and all ICT led initiatives as well to seek their greater contribution towards country's socio-economic development, we need to ensure availability of ICT resources and training for women specially in rural areas in a time-bound and planned manner. At all national policy making level we must emphasize gender-sensitiveness in all its e-Government and ICT-led Programmes. An important step necessary to enhance the participation of women in e-governance is to create rural multimedia centers for women to support the fact that the economically empowered women would afford good health care, for herself and the family; the best education for her children, good shelter, food self- sufficiency and security for the nation.

Reference:

- Bendera, Stella. (1998). 'Girls' primary schooling and puberty in Tanzania'. In *Gender and Education in Tanzanian schools*. Dar Es Salaam: DUP.
- Hutchinson, T. & A. Waters, (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Islam, K.M.B. (2003a). *Women Rights Education: A Gender Equity Issue for Development in Ethiopia*. Paper accepted for the 2nd International Conference on Development in Ethiopia, July, 2003. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian American Foundation.
- Islam, K.M.B. (2003b). *Towards ESP In Ethiopia: A 3D English Language Needs Survey*. Paper accepted for the Workshop on English Language Teaching in Ethiopia, June, 2003. Addis Ababa: Unity University College.
- Mehta, J.A. (1996). 'Education and training in technological skills and science understanding for girls and women'. In *Gender, Education and Development- Report of the Expert Group Meeting*. Turin: ILO.

- Moser, C.O.N. (1993). *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice & Training*. London: Rutledge.
- Oakley, A. (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: Temple Smith.
- Osler, A. ed. (1994). *Development Education: Global Perspectives in the curriculum*. London: Cassell.
- Rubin, G. (1975). 'The traffic in women: notes on the "political economy" of sex', in R. Reiter (ed.), *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, pp 157-210. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Sen, G. and C. Grown. (1987). *Development, Crisis and Alternative Visions*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Snyder, M.C. and M. Tadesse. (1995). *African Women and Development*. Johannesburg: WUP.
- UNFPA (2000). *Lives Together, Worlds Apart, Men and Women in a Time of Change. State of the World Population 2000*. New York: UNFPA.
- College English, Volume: 1. (1996) Addis Ababa: DFL, Addis Ababa University Publication

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr K M Baharul Islam has been working in the area of ICT Policies and e-Government in Asia and Africa for more than a decade. Starting career as a university faculty in computational linguistics, he has taken keen interest in broadening the ICT implications for mass access and developmental use. He initiated and headed the Center for Educational Technology at the National Institute of Technology (Deemed University), Silchar, India where he taught for eight years. Since 1999, Dr Islam is presently the Chairman in the rank of a Minister of State for State Rural Technology Promotion Council in the Government of Assam, India. He has been involved in various UN projects in Asia and Africa and served in Cambodia, Rwanda and Ethiopia on different UNESCO / UNDP initiatives. Before taking up his present assignment in Ethiopia, Dr Islam was working as a Reader in the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in India and later as an Associate Professor at the Addis Ababa University. Presently he is a Consultant on ICT policy and e-Government at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Dr Islam is also an Advocate and presently doing his LLM (IT & Telecom Law) at the University of Strathclyde and is a scholar on the Master of Populations Studies program at the International Institute of Population Science, Mumbai. His recent works includes e-Govt Strategy and NICI Policy for The Gambia. He can be reached at PB-426, Code 1110 Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) or Email: islamb@un.org or drbahar@gmail.com

