Report on the Roundtable discussion "ICT as an instrument for the empowerment of young women and girls"

The Division for the Advancement of Women, in partnership with the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) and the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Program (APCWNSP), organized a roundtable discussion "ICT as an instrument for the empowerment of young women and girls" in Geneva, Switzerland, on 26 September 2007. The roundtable, which was held in conjunction with the Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development, aimed to ensure attention to the needs, priorities and contributions of girls and young women, as well as boys and young men, at the Forum.

The roundtable presenters were:
Ms Itir Akdogan (Turkey)
Ms Mridula Swamy (India)
Ms Ms. Lerato Legoabe (South Africa)
Mr Jesenko Osmanagić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

The moderator was Mr. Sarbuland Khan, Executive Coordinator, United Nations Global Alliance for ICT and Development. The rapporteur was Ms. Mavic Cabrera Balleza, Senior Program Associate of the International Women's Tribune Centre. The rapporteur prepared this report for the Division for the Advancement of Women.

<u>**Presentations**</u>

A summary of the presentations highlighting the key messages from each of the panelists is given below.

Mr Sarbuland Khan, Executive Coordinator, United Nations Global Alliance for ICT and Development:

In opening the roundtable, Mr Khan noted that while the potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, socio-economic development and effective governance is well recognized, the benefits of ICT have been unevenly distributed within and between countries. In the context of the "digital divide" between countries, regions, sectors and socio-economic groups, a "gender divide" has also been identified.

The capacity of young women and girls to exploit the potential of new ICT as tools for empowerment is constrained in different ways. Young women and girls need ICT for the same reasons as young men and boys; to access information of importance for their personal development, educational achievements, and employment opportunities, as well as to increase their participation in the community and other contexts. ICT offers flexibility in time and space, which can be of particular value to young women and girls who may face social isolation, particularly in developing countries. It can also be effectively utilized for the peer networking which is critical to empowerment of adolescent girls.

In addition to physical access to the technology and the ability to utilize it, access also refers to the ability to make use of the information and the resources provided. The factors identified as constraints to access and use, i.e. poverty, illiteracy, including

computer illiteracy, and language barriers are particularly acute for young women and girls. Most poor young women and girls in developing countries are further removed from the information age than the young men and boys in similar situations.

While ICT is being increasingly applied in education in both developed and developing countries, continuing gender gaps in education, due to domestic responsibilities, lack of mobility and socio-cultural practices that downplay the importance of education of girls, restrict their access to basic computer literacy. In addition, ICT implementation policies and resource allocations in education are often gender-blind and, as a result, the special needs and priorities of girls are neglected. Even where public access spaces, such as cybercafés and telecentres, have been created for easy access to ICT, the location of and arrangements around public access centres are decided without considering the constraints for young women and girls, such as inappropriate opening times (including evenings), security issues and lack of transport.

Even when physical and technical access is secured, it is important to ensure that the content available through ICT meets the priorities and needs of young women and girls. Repackaging and augmenting content (downloading, simplifying, adapting information to local contexts and translating into local languages), and documenting and uploading local-origin information, are critical steps for enhancing the relevance and use of ICT for girls and young women. Innovative means of ensuring that young women and girls can access content relevant to their needs and priorities are needed.

(Turkey) Itir Akdogan: Ms. Akdogan explained that, with the development of the Information Society, more and more people are becoming e-citizens by using new information and communication technologies to communicate with other members of society and to exercise their rights and fulfill their duties as citizens. Because women and girls generally have less access to ICT, they run the risk of being deprived of their rights as citizens. She underlined that women and girls should have equal access and develop the necessary skills to use ICT. It is important to ensure engagement with ICT at an early age.

Ms. Akdogan emphasized that enough talking has been done by governments, civil society, the UN and other intergovernmental agencies, and the private sector. It is now the time to translate the words into action. She provided examples of projects that worked to empower young women and girls as e-citizens:

1.	The project "*Empowerment of Youth for e-Governance in Turkey*", organized by the Youth Association for Habitat and UNDP, aims to strengthen ICT capacities by training young women and men to become active users of the existing Local Agenda 21 e-Governance Web Portal. A selected group of young women and men were provided IT training to increase their chances of getting employed in the IT industry. Basic computer training has been provided to 2500 young people in a period of 1.5 years as part of this project.

2.	A project organized by the Ayhan Sahenk Foundation, Microsoft, the Ministry of Education, and the Youth Association for Habitat, refurbishes used PCs and distributes them to schools, youth NGOs and local youth councils all around in Turkey. 6000 PCs have been refurbished and distributed, as of May 2006. The project also provides informatics training.

3.   "*Young Action in Information*" is a project carried out by Cisco System, the Turkish Informatics Foundation, UNDP, the Istanbul Technical University and the Youth Association for Habitat. It aims to provide youth in Turkey with the skills needed to build their careers in the ICT sector. Priority is given to socio-economically disadvantaged young people, particularly young girls. 10 trainers from around the country have been trained in informatics and internet networks technologies. These trainers now train 20 youth each in their repsective hometowns.

4.   "*Bridging the digital divide: Empowering youth for Turkey's e-transformation*", a project carried out by the Youth Association for Habitat, UNDPand the Turkey Vodafone Foundation, aims to train 1,000,000 young people from 81 cities for 30 months. Participants will also be awarded with the ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence). Girls and other disadvantaged youth will be given priority in this project.

5.   "*CIVIC-WEB- Youth, Internet and civic participation*" is a project organized by the University of London, Media and Communication Studies - Lund University of Sweden, Amsterdam School of Communication Studies, Center of Media and Communication Studies – Budapest Central European University, Faculty of Communication - Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, Center for Social Communication Studies - University of Ljubljana in Slovenia and Istanbul Bilgi University, with support from the Eropean Union. CIVIC-WEB focuses on civic websites currently emerging on the internet, which are targeted at young people (aged 15-25). It considers the role such sites play in constructing youth identities in relation to civic participation, paying particular attention to intergenerational relations, culture, gender equality and nationality, including European identities.

(India) Mridula Swamy: Ms. Swamy presented "*Mahiti Manthana*", a project of IT for Change located within Mahila Samakhya. It is a development intervention by the Government of India that aims to empower socially- and economically-disadvantaged women in rural areas through the formation of collectives (or sanghas). Efforts are made to develop a comprehensive ICT-based resource that supports the existing activities and processes of the sangha women. The project uses a multi-pronged ICT approach, adopting community radio, locally-made videos and rural telecentres as its main forms of technology.

Mahiti Manthana telecentres function as spaces owned and managed by the sangha women where they collectively listen to the radio, watch videos and discuss issues covered on the radio and videos, such as agriculture, health, education and government services.

In line with the emphasis on involving young girls as the 'second-line leadership', the Mahiti Manthana project focuses on the needs of adolescent girls in rural areas. In addition to the issues mentioned above, the radio and videos take up issues relevant to adolescent girls, such as menstruation, the division of labor in the household, mobility within and beyond the village, child marriage, choice of marriage partner, educational constraints, and livelihood opportunities. The girls have the opportunity to give their views on the issues and to operate the telecentre.

Ms. Swamy underscored that sustainability is an extremely critical element in any ICT for development project. She considered that sustainability should not be exclusively defined in terms of financial viability but should also include the empowering outcomes for women and girls. She also stressed that public policy plays a vital role in ensuring ICT projects have lasting impact on gender equality. Governments should learn from NGO experiences and institutionalize good practices within policy frameworks on ICT for development.

(South Africa) Lerato Legoabe: Ms. Legoabe introduced two projects of Women'sNet, a feminist organization that works to advance gender equality and justice in South Africa through the use of ICT. Women'sNet provides content and training that supports individual women and girls, as well as women's organizations and networks, to produce and control ICT content. It advocates for access to information as a human right and for the means of communication to be made affordable and accessible for all.

Ms. Legoabe presented the following projects:

1.   *Girls'Net* - This project promotes awareness of the gender equality experiences of high school girls in South African provinces in order to underscore the importance of girls' education. The training equips the girls with the necessary technical skills to produce content for the web site and other media platforms.

Based on the experience in this project, Ms. Legoabe emphasized the need to recognize that the socialization process that girls and boys undergo, influences the way they access and use new ICT. For example, there is a common notion that girls are weak in science and mathematics and that, therefore, they will be constrained in using ICT. On the other hand, boys are assumed to be naturally good in science and mathematics and also to have natural skills for using new ICT. As a result, there are more men in programming or higher end IT jobs compared to women. The majority of women are in low end IT jobs such as data entry. Many girls and women are conditioned to think that they are not suited for the IT field, and this becomes a barrier to their usage and exploration of new IT technologies. In implementing ICT projects - including training and capacity building – it is important to recognize and address the socio-cultural barriers that prevent women and girls from fully accessing and benefiting from ICT .

2.   *Digital Stories* - Digital stories are the outputs of digital storytelling workshops in which women and girls from different parts of Africa are trained to use ICT to combat domestic, sexual and other forms of violence faced by African women. The workshops demonstrate the potential of digital stories for promoting social change, by developing content developed by women and for women.

In the workshop, participants shared their stories (many of them for the first time) which allowed them to discover what they had in common: their suffering and fear, but also their courage in surviving violence. Ms. Legoabe emphasized that the digital stories project is more than learning to use the new ICT; it involves using ICT in healing and empowerment processes.

Both the *Girls'Net* and *Digital Stories* projects enable girls and women to use their voices to tell policy makers about the kind of information that is relevant to them. They are

critical venues for self expression and raise awareness that girls and young women have their own voices. There is no need to "give women voice" or "speak for the voiceless."

(Bosnia and Herzegovina) Jesenko Osmanagić: Mr. Osmanagić explained that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a traditionally male-led society. He noted that change is now taking place as a result of the efforts of women and youth organizations, in cooperation with the international community. He added however, that the opportunities for grass roots population involvement remain limited. Mr. Osmanagić noted that other development issues preoccupy politicians and government officials and make it difficult to advocate for ICT resources for young women and girls.

Mr. Osmanagić reported that a Policy, Strategy and Action Plan for developing ICT society in BiH had been develop with UNDP support. The documents identify the ICT resources and activities that are necessary to ensure improved access. A gender-sensitive approach to access to ICT is highlighted. However, Mr. Osmanagić noted that the current implementation of the Policy, Strategies and Action Plan is slow because of the lack of laws and mechanisms that would support implementation, and the limited budgets for ICT.

Mr. Osmanagić emphasized that the BiH education system is a potential driver for maximizing the benefits of ICT for young women and girls. To realize this potential, several challenges need, however, to be addressed. Among these are the fact that the education system has not established an academic network on ICT; educators have not been trained to use ICT in implementing the curricula; very few ICT teachers and professors are capable of developing gender-sensitive ICT educational approaches; ICT education platforms do not exist in the local language; most educators have limited English language skills; most schools do not have good computer infrastructure; there are no government funds for network connections and maintenance of ICT equipment in schools; and there is limited investment from international organizations for ICT education.

Currently, youth NGOs and women's NGOs are the main implementers of ICT projects for women and girls. These organizations conduct basic ICT courses that equip girls and young women with skills to produce print, web, video and audio materials. Some organizations encourage young women and girls to use the internet, radio stations and web portals to learn about existing educational and economic opportunities. Challenges confronting these organizations include: the limited number of female ICT trainers and scarce funding. The international community does not see ICT projects as a priority.

Mr. Osmanagić emphasized the need to support the education sector, NGOs and young women so that they can develop more materials for advocacy on gender equality.

Open Forum

An interactive discussion followed the presentations by the panelists. The main points raised by the audience during the open forum are given below:

- Computer games are widely used by youth, and for many, provide the first introduction to ICT. By learning to play these games, the youth progress to

making use of the more constructive aspects of ICT. Unfortunately, the content of computer games is usually related to action and violence, and, at times, even pornography. These elements prevent computer games from being more widely used by girls, as a first introduction to ICT. Therefore it is important to look at computer gaming from a gender perspective, because this is one area where digital gender divide is reflected.

- It is necessary to ensure girls have increased free time to engage in ICT, on an equal basis with boys.

- It is important to identify what skills exist among women and girls in Africa. Networking is an important instrument in this regard. This was emphasized by one participant, who pointed out that the digital gender divide is more prevalent in Africa than anywhere else.

- The fact that boys and girls are raised differently can impact on the potential of girls to access and benefit from ICT.

- The importance of working on social and cultural aspects of ICT usage was raised by a government representative from India.

- A government delegate from Pakistan shared information on an internship programme for young women where interns receive 10,000 rupees per month for one year. The programme trains the young women to work as customer service representatives and as call centre staff.

- A government representative from Bangladesh announced that they have a similar internship programme as well as a programme to train young women as teachers.

- Participants also noted that ICT should be utilized to respond to the needs of people with disabilities.

The **responses of the panelists, rapporteur and moderator** to the main points raised in the discussion are given below.

- Ms. Akdogan pointed out the importance of using ICT to challenge traditional socialization processes and change stereotypes. She noted the need to address the practice that, in most homes, PCs are placed in boy's' rooms. One option could be to encourage the use of laptops rather than desktop PCs. Because the laptop is a mobile piece of IT equipment, it does not have to be placed permanently in any one room in the house and can be shared more equitably between the boys and girls in the household.

- Ms. Swamy emphasized that gender equality issues on ICT need to be addressed at the highest policy making levels in governments.

- All the panelists agreed on the need to use ICT more actively to address the needs of persons with disabilities, regardless of age and gender.

- The rapporteur, Ms. Cabrera-Balleza, noted that in looking at the differences in the ways girls and boys use ICT, it is necessary to examine the intersecting socio-cultural factors that define how boys and girls use ICT. A common perception is that boys are more inclined towards science than girls and therefore receive more training in this field. This thinking is reinforced in both homes and schools.

- On issue on gaming, Ms. Cabrera-Balleza noted, that most of the online games at present feature sexualized images of women, even those that are projected as empowered women.

- The moderator, Mr. Sarbuland Khan, in closing the discussion, highlighted the importance of using ICT as incubators and developing the potential of girls to become entrepreneurs. ICT should also be more effectively used to challenge traditional socialization processes. He cited the Grameen phone project where the Grameen telephones managed by women outnumber telecom phones. Mr. Khan also cited Malaysia as a success story in gender mainstreaming in ICT. He noted that a number of Astro "technologeniuses" are young women. He also underlined the need to reach out to young women and girls in the rural areas.

The recommendations and action points arising of the Youth Forum
The recommendations and action points of the roundtable discussion, which were presented in the closing session: "Reporting on Key recommendations for follow-up actions", by Mridula Swamy on behalf of all the panelists and participants at the round table, are outlined below:

- Ensure young women's and girls' active participation in e-citizenship and e-democracy. Initiate projects on the ground that will lead towards this.

- Ensure that e-governance implementation promotes and takes into account young women's engagement and leadership in civic action.

- Facilitate the creation of content by girls and young women, and thereby increase their ownership and control over ICT, and bring about greater benefits for them.

- Create spaces where girls and young women are able to speak for themselves, especially to break the culture of silence around their situations.

- Recognize that in implementing ICT projects - including training and capacity building - the socio-cultural barriers that prevent girls and young women from fully accessing and benefiting from ICT must be addressed.

- Acknowledge that ICT plays a key role in the promotion of girls' education and rights.

- Analyze how traditional gender roles impact girls' and young women's access to and use of ICT.

- Engage men in the process of promoting ICT for the empowerment of girls and young women.

- Address the specific needs of young women and girls with disabilities.

- Create platforms for exchange between different groups of girls and young women, including through ensuring that they are part of networks for empowerment.

- Engage parents in using ICT to empower young women and girls, including through educating parents on the need to provide equal access to ICT resources for boys and girls

- Use ICT to challenge traditional socialization processes and stereotypes which lead to inequalities between young women and girls and young men and boys. .

- Ensure that national ICT policies reflect gender equality concerns, including the needs and priorities of girls and young women.

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