

**World Summit on the Information Society
Second meeting of the Preparatory Committee
17-28 February 2003**

**Message by
Ms. Angela E.V. King
Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Gender Issues
and Advancement of Women**

As the second session of the preparatory committee for the World Summit on the Information Society begins its challenging work, it has an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that the potential of ICT as a tool for development is fully realized. If the global information society of tomorrow is to be an inclusive society where all persons, without distinction, are empowered to participate freely in creating, sharing, receiving and utilizing information and knowledge, for their own development and the shaping of a better world, careful consideration needs to be given to the realities of people's lives. In many instances, those realities are different for women than they are from men.

In general terms, women are poorer than men, they are less well educated, have higher levels of illiteracy, earn less, and hold fewer positions of power and decision-making in the family, in businesses, and in political and public life. Such gender-based inequalities will have an impact on women's ability to benefit equally from the opportunities offered by technological advances, or to contribute fully to shaping the information society of tomorrow.

Where women's mobility is limited, because they are poor, live in remote areas, or face constraints based on tradition or culture, solutions for access have to be carefully considered to take account of such disadvantages. Where women work predominantly in the informal sector, in the home or in micro-enterprises, creative approaches are necessary to adapt ICT to the needs of women, not vice-versa, so that these technologies can enhance women's economic empowerment. Where education or health is being offered through new technologies, women might not always find content that is relevant, or in a form that is accessible to them. Where national ICT policies are developed without the contribution of all stakeholders and without the interests of all stakeholders being taken into account, the result may well be not only a perpetuation of the "digital divide", but a deepening of the gender divide as well.

Women in all parts of the world are already using new technologies to improve their economic situation and expand employment, disseminate information, enhance participation, lobby for their priorities and needs, network and cooperate within and across borders. Women – Government officials, representatives of NGOs and civil society, entrepreneurs – have also organized to bring their priorities, expectations and needs into this preparatory process so that the Summit and its outcome benefit men and women alike.

We all recognize that the achievement of gender equality is not solely the responsibility of women – it is the responsibility of all of us, women and men, Governments, international organizations and civil society – and that women’s own initiatives must go hand in hand with a societal commitment to gender equality. Their activities must be matched by governmental actions and initiatives to eliminate discrimination against women, and create an environment where progress towards gender equality is not a daily struggle, but is ensured as a result of explicit and systematic attention to gender perspectives in all activities. The information sector is not exempt from this responsibility.

I call on this PrepCom to take seriously its share of responsibility for ensuring that the information society will indeed be supportive of gender equality: by recognizing gender-based differences and disadvantages in access and use; and by responding to such disadvantages with adequate policies, programmes and strategies across the entire scope of the World Summit on the Information Society.

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