

**Special Joint Meeting of the Second and Third Committees of the UNGA  
dedicated to  
“Communication for Development: Using ICT and Broadband to Accelerate  
Social and Economic Development”**

**12 November 2011, 3:00 – 6:00 p.m.  
Venue: ECOSOC Chamber, NLB**

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**Why is it important to empower girls and women through ICTs?**

The speed at which the technology has spread across the globe is unprecedented, and in the world of 7 billion people, we now have more than 6 billion mobile phones. 75 % of them in developing countries. 2.3 billion are connected to the internet, out of which 1 billion on mobile devices. By 2015 there will be more mobile devices than PCs.

ICT's have changed all aspects of our lives in the past couple of decades. It has changed the way we get information, the way we communicate, way we work, way we learn and get education, the way we play and entertain. Increasingly it is changing the way people get health care, financial services, government services... People and entire communities that previously had no banking services, now use mobile banking to manage their financial resources more effectively. People and communities that previously had no banking services, now use mobile banking to manage their financial resources more effectively. However, women and girls are 21% less likely than men and boys to own a mobile phone and have access to technology.

We must make sure that women and girls have access and use ICT. They must not miss out on the vast opportunities ICT offers to improving economic and social status for themselves, their families and communities.

**The role of networks to promote education and careers for girls and young women in ICT**

Women and girls are underrepresented in the traditional media. What makes this situation even worse, even when women and girls are present in the media, their role is very seldom focal, decision making or even active. And this picture created by the media globally perpetuates the existing gender stereotypes. Stereotypes that are especially bad when it comes to ICT – women and girls are just not seen as very apt users of technology, not to mention ICT professionals.

So, girls never get the idea that they should pursue education in this high growth sector, that creates new jobs and entire new professions, that never existed before. Jobs that are well paid have flexible hours, good working conditions and excellent career prospects. Jobs that in all respects are ideally suited for women.

And it's not just the girls that can never see this as an opportunity for themselves. Their parents and families never get that idea, just their teachers and communities. So, even if a girl has an interest in ICT – there is no one to encourage her to pursue it, she faces disbelief and discouragement coming from

everyone around her and eventually gives up, because that is just not something for girls... And that, no doubt, needs to be changed in the traditional media.

Luckily, we now also have the social media and the ICT to change that as well. Until 10 years ago the Internet was in many ways similar to traditional media – it had a hub and spoke structure – not many content producers and numerous consumers across the world. That was reflected in the amount of uploaded and downloaded data – Internet traffic was extremely asymmetrical, not much was uploaded, everybody was only downloading. But in the past decade the Internet has entirely changed its paradigm – it is now a peer to peer symmetrical network – everybody can generate and share content.

People and groups with same or similar interests and goals can come together, exchange and promote their ideas and encourage and empower each other. They can teach, tutor, coach and mentor regardless of where they live.

It is most important that we use the ICT's vast possibilities to empower girls. To encourage them to use ICT to learn, to look after their health, to improve their economic prospects.

### **Policies that would enable them to contribute to social and economic empowerment**

The key to social and economic empowerment are securing access to all, including all vulnerable groups and offering them adequate content. That will be a plethora of diverse content in local languages, addressing specific needs of local population and specific groups within this population. If we exclude girls and women from the process of content development that content is sure to meet only a fraction of local family and community needs, because the women in the family and the community are the care takers.

Today, for example, majority of mobile applications in the developed world are related to entertainment and gaming, but in developing countries majority of applications address real life problems, and that trend must be sustained.

But, currently only 4% of mobile application developers are women. If women do not participate in the content creation, it is clear that the needs of women and girls will not be addressed most accurately.

Education policies must include ICT education for girls. Employment policies must offer equal opportunity to both man and women with no hidden or implicit barriers for women such as consecutive years of experience or internship that cannot be obtained.

In conclusion, I would say that if we want to maximize the effects of ICT on social and economic development, women and girls must participate in all aspects of development and use of this life changing technology. Because the girls need ICT to empower themselves, but in order to sustain its rapid growth, the technology also needs girls and their still untapped talent.