

**UNITED NATIONS**  
**INTER-AGENCY NETWORK ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY**

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**CONFÉRENCE DES NATIONS UNIES SUR  
LE COMMERCE ET LE DÉVELOPPEMENT**



**UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE  
ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT**

**GENDER AND THE INFORMATION ECONOMY:  
ENHANCING PRODUCTIVE CAPACITY AND COMPETITIVENESS  
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

**DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN**

New information and communication technologies can be powerful tools for increasing the competitiveness of countries and contributing towards economic growth and development. However, in many parts of the world, women, especially those living in rural areas, are still excluded from accessing the Internet or do not have the skills to use it in a profitable way. On the other hand, examples from developing countries demonstrate that, if given access and know-how, women entrepreneurs have benefited from using the new technologies in a large number of areas, such as getting access to valuable business information, finding new (export) markets, marketing their products and services over the Internet, securing large orders through networking with community members, and generally cutting costs through more efficient business practices.

ICT-induced changes in the labour market have affected women's employment, in particular in developing countries. Partly triggered by the expansion of global business process outsourcing, employment for women in ICT-related services has grown enormously over the past few years. Today, women take up significant shares of the workforce in the ICT-enabled industry in developing countries, notably in Asia, but increasingly so in Africa, Central and Latin America. However, women usually predominate in those services requiring rather routine, low-level skills or limited technical training. They include activities such as customer call centers, data entry and processing, transcription services, claims processing and

remote secretarial services. It is more difficult for women to move into the higher-skilled, better-paid jobs of the ICT-related service sector, such as software development and programming or geographical information systems (GIS) analysis. Addressing the underlying barriers to this needs to be high on the policy agenda for creating an all-inclusive information society and economy.

**MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN ICT POLICIES AND STRATEGIES**

While many examples exist of how women have used the new technologies to improve their businesses, create new businesses or find new employment opportunities, the large majority of women in developing countries are still excluded from the information economy. This implies a range of actions to be taken, both by women themselves as well as policy makers, to address the gender digital divide. Women need to become active promoters of the use of ICT and enhance their capacities in ICT training and skills. Women also need to become more involved in ICT policy making and development to ensure that women's needs are incorporated in policies related to infrastructure, access, training and education. Policy makers need to mainstream gender in the complete range of policies that comprise their national ICT strategies, with the objective to enhance women's participation in the information economy and thus increase national capacity and achieve greater economic growth and development, and international competitiveness.

## UNCTAD'S CONTRIBUTION

UNCTAD's member states have recognized that providing women with rapid and affordable access to ICT and the Internet, as well as mainstreaming gender in national ICT policies are crucial for achieving development goals. As a result, UNCTAD has been asked to carry out further studies on the opportunities created for women in the information economy, and to develop recommendations for mainstreaming gender in ICT policies for inclusion in the outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). UNCTAD has stressed the gender dimension in its inputs provided to the WSIS preparatory process.

UNCTAD contributes to the work on ICT and gender through focusing on the economic opportunities provided to women through the adoption of ICT. Within the framework of its ongoing work on ICT and economic development (including e-commerce), it makes an effort to incorporate the gender dimension in its analytical as well as policy work.

### 1. ANALYTICAL WORK ON GENDER, ICT AND DEVELOPMENT

The E-Commerce and Development Report 2002 features a chapter on "Gender, E-Commerce and Development". The study outlines different opportunities and challenges women face in the digital economy. It illustrates how ICT enhance business opportunities for self-employed women in developing countries and how they create new employment in ICT-related services industries. It also discusses the main barriers women have to overcome in order to fully benefit from the new technologies. The study makes a number of policy recommendations for mainstreaming gender in ICT policy, including in policy areas related to enhancing human capacity and training, improving access to telecommunications infrastructure, new technologies and the Internet, providing finance to SMEs and promoting new business opportunities or employment for women in the ICT sector.

The gender dimension will be included in future editions of the E-Commerce and Development Report, as appropriate. In line with UNCTAD's efforts to mainstream gender in its work programme, the ECDR 2003 will not feature a separate chapter on gender, but will discuss gender-related aspects in a number of chapters, such as those on recent ICT trends and developments, outsourcing of e-services, and national e-strategies and policies.

## 2. CAPACITY BUILDING AND POLICY WORK

UNCTAD makes an effort to include the gender dimension in its seminars and conferences as well as intergovernmental meetings taking place in Geneva and elsewhere.

As part of its ongoing work on ICT strategies, UNCTAD has included the gender topic on the agenda of the Expert Meeting on E- Strategies (Geneva, 10-12 July 2002) and its Regional Conferences on E-Strategies held in Bangkok (20-22 November 2002) and Tunis (19-21 June 2003). The gender dimension will also be addressed in future conferences UNCTAD is organizing on the subject of ICT and the information economy, such as those foreseen for the transition economies (October 2003), and for Latin America and the Caribbean (November 2003). Gender has also been mainstreamed in the outcomes resulting from these meetings.

Within its role as manager of the IANWGE Task Force on Gender and Trade, UNCTAD aims at launching a number of activities to mainstream gender in its work programme, including in the area of ICT and the information economy. For example, the UNCTAD project on globalization and gender, which is currently being finalized for presentation to donors, includes an important component on ICT and gender, to be implemented in cooperation with ITU.

UNCTAD could contribute to further work on gender and ICT in the following areas:

- Case studies on the way ICT can create new economic opportunities for women in developing countries, including in higher-skilled and better-paid jobs;
- Sectoral studies, focusing on sectors where new employment opportunities are created for women based on the adoption of ICT (such as in ICT-enabled services or e-business export sectors);
- Capacity building for women wishing to engage in e-business;
- Gender sensitisation of policy makers in the area of ICT and development.

**For further information:**

**[www.unctad.org/ecommerce](http://www.unctad.org/ecommerce)**