

### **Background Note**

## **High-Level Panel on “Women in the Information Society: Building a Gender Balanced Knowledge-Based Economy”**

**Conference Room Le Kram  
16 November 2005, from 15.00 to 17.00 hrs.**

### Organized by:

UN Economic Commission for Africa

UN Economic and Social Commission for  
Western Asia

UN Economic Commission for Europe

United Nations Conference  
on Trade and Development

UN Economic Commission for Latin  
America and the Caribbean

UN Information and Communication  
Technologies Task Force

UN Economic and Social Commission  
for Asia and the Pacific

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The role of women is key for socioeconomic development and, therefore, women participation should be promoted. According to the Secretary General’s report “In larger freedom”, “empowered women can be some of the most effective drivers of development.” The Round Table on “Promoting the participation of women in the Information Society and the Knowledge-based Economy” aims at sharing experiences, exchanging good practices and creating awareness about how ICT could be used to empower women, improve gender equality, enhance women participation and narrow the gender gap. Additionally, three key issues need to be discussed, namely, increasing women literacy, improving education and creating employment in the Information Society.

ICT provide a main tool to reduce discrimination and to empower women for all type of activities, since information and capacity to communicate and to enrol in decision-making processes are the basic pillars of empowerment. As indicated in the Beijing Declaration, “ICT are a powerful tool that women could use for mobilization, information exchange and empowerment”. Moreover, ICT can contribute to increase primary and secondary education for girls, to ensure access to reproductive health services and to provide employment in the ICT and related sector.

However, women are taking less advantage of the process of building the Information Society and benefit less than men from this process. This is reflected in lower numbers of women as ICT users, producers and policy makers. Structural inequalities and the existence of gender-specific resource constraints, including income, time, educational bias and cultural factors appear to be responsible for this situation. In particular, family responsibilities and lower incomes leave women with less time and disposable income to access information technologies in particular outside their houses. Women and girls on average receive less education and training, especially in developing countries, and therefore may lack the language and other skills required for engaging in activities leading to the creation of the Information Society. Finally, young women may have less access to ICT, through public sites, especially when they are located in Internet cafés, either because going to such places alone may be socially inappropriate in some cultures or because the cafés are placed in areas where women may feel concerned about their personal safety.

Policy makers will have to address numerous challenges in building the Information Society, including adequate supply of human, financial and institutional resources. The gender dimension should, however, be part of this process from its very outset. Policy makers have to recognize the need to build an inclusive Information Society, promoting the full and active participation of women and men in this process from all walks of socioeconomic life. Only then will building awareness, encouraging participation by all stakeholders and developing relevant ICT policies bring results. It is only through full and balanced participation in ICT capacity building that an equitable Information Society will emerge, ensuring equal opportunities and equal rights for both men and women at home and in the workplace.

The World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) provides a useful framework for mainstreaming gender into the process of building an inclusive Information Society and Knowledge-based economy. The Declaration of Principles endorsed at the first phase of WSIS reaffirmed the enormous opportunities for women provided by recent developments in ICT and acknowledged the need to close the gender digital divide. The Declaration also underlined the role of women as equal partners to men, in crafting the future Information Society. Full commitment to and implementation of these principles is necessary to ensure that ICT empowers women and leads to their full participation in the development process. This and other related issues should be a focus for the gender mainstreaming agenda and, across all regions, for the strategies for building the Information Society.

Though a commitment to mainstreaming gender in national ICT strategies is essential, a regional perspective plays an important role in this process. The exchange of experiences and good practices both within and among regions could help policy makers to establish effective mainstreaming policies in a way that women perform an active role in formulating relevant policies and strategic plans in the ICT area and that women benefit from the Information Society.

### **The Round Table and its Themes:**

The Round Table on “Promoting the participation of women in the Information Society and the Knowledge-based Economy” will address lessons learned and experiences gained by each region in their gender mainstreaming efforts. The economic and social changes resulting from women being given equal opportunities for participation, ownership, control and consumption of information will be given specific emphasis. As a result of this discussion, main directions for further actions will be presented.

**The Round Table will address the following themes:**

- ICT as an effective tool for the promotion of gender equality in the Information Society.
- Bridging the gender digital gap in the Information Society and knowledge-based economy.
- The role of women in building the Information Society and the gender mainstreaming agenda for building the Information Society.
- Lessons learned and experiences in gender mainstreaming.
- Initiatives and measures to leapfrog women's participation in Information Society in various areas: local, national, regional and international; and at all levels of the career ladder: field-worker, executive, managerial and decision-making.
- The way forward

**Co-Chairpersons:**

H. E. Dr. Leonel Fernández, President of the Dominican Republic

H. E. Ms. Nadia Alsaeed, Representative of Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah and Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

**Moderator:** Ms. Cynthia Romero Mamon, President and Managing Director of Sun Microsystems Philippines, Inc.

**Panelists:** Ms. Mervat M. Tallawy, Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)

Mr. Paolo Garonna, Officer-in-Charge, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)

Ms. Fatima Seye Sylla, Chairperson of Bokk Jang Bokk Jeff and Director of Digital Freedom Initiative, Senegal

Professor Natasa Gospic, Professor at the University of Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro, Chairperson of ITU Working Group on Gender Issues, and Board Member of Community of Yugoslav PTT

Ms. Barbara Barrett, member of corporate boards of Raytheon and Exponent, Inc., and former President and CEO of the American Management Association

**Contact:** Mr. Omar Bizri, Director, Information and Communication Technology Division, UNESCWA, Email: bizri@un.org

and

Ms. Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, Senior Social Affairs Officer and Gender Focal Point, Office of the Executive Secretary, UNECE, E-mail: ewa.zimny@unece.org