

I welcome the opportunity to participate in this panel on “New solutions for the needs of disadvantaged communities: The ICT villages”. I will speak on the need to ensure the full involvement in, and access to benefits of, ICT for women and girls as an important means to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ICT can provide enormous opportunities for promoting gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG3). However existing inequalities between women and men, in relation to education, access to and control over resources, employment, and involvement in decision-making, as well as inadequate safety and security in some contexts – all of which, in themselves are clear indications that the MDGS have not been achieved, have led to a gender digital divide where women and girls have unequal access to and benefit from, and less influence on ICT policies and programmes, than men and boys. Unless this gender digital divide is explicitly addressed, ICT may exacerbate existing disadvantage and inequalities between women and men and can even lead to new inequalities, for example in access to information and employment opportunities, and new forms of discrimination and violence.

A strong global framework for gender equality and empowerment of women is in place through the Beijing Platform for Action adopted in 1995, and the human rights treaty: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (ratified by 185 States, as of April 2007).

The Millennium Declaration recognized that

Among the new challenges in a globalizing world, is systematically and effectively mobilizing the new information and communication technologies (ICT) in support of gender equality and women's empowerment.

In the context of the growing importance of information technology, in 2003 the Commission on the Status of Women discussed and adopted recommendations on women and ICT. It recognized that if existing gender disparities in access to and use of ICT were identified and eliminated, ICT could be a powerful catalyst for gender equality and empowerment of women.

The Declaration of Principles, adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003, also recognized that information and communication technologies provide enormous opportunities for women and that women should be key actors in the information society. The WSIS II, in 2005, recognized the gender digital divide in society and committed to overcoming this divide.

The Millennium Declaration and the MDGs provide an important unifying framework for the development activities of Member States and entities of the United Nations system. Non-governmental organizations have also embraced the opportunity the MDG framework provides to address the critical development goals of eradicating poverty, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, ensuring environmental sustainability and promoting global partnerships and solidarity.

While it is important to have one goal specifically focused on gender equality and empowerment of women, it is also essential to ensure that gender perspectives are incorporated into all other MDGs. Where the millennium development goals have not given explicit attention to gender equality it is important to ensure that gender perspectives are clearly addressed in concrete plans for implementation.

It is increasingly clear that unless sufficient attention is given to MDG3 on gender equality and empowerment of women, and to the gender perspectives in all other MDGs, none of the development goals in the MDGs can be achieved.

ICT has potential to support the achievement of all the MDGs by facilitating the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and increasing the inclusiveness of development processes. It facilitates communication and collaboration (networking) between stakeholders. It also provides tools for cost-effective and timely tracking of the achievement of the MDGs.

In recent years, e-governance has become a priority area of many governments resulting in the implementation of programmes that apply ICT in delivering government services and providing information to the public using electronic means, thus promoting transparency and accountability. E-governance uses new technologies to strengthen the public voice to revitalize democratic processes and public debate, and refocus the management, structure, and oversight of

government to better serve the public interest, all of which is centr

The former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, aptly referred6 cs 01

Research on opportunities for women related to ICT has, however, indicated that patterns of gender segregation are being reproduced in the information economy with women concentrated in end-user, lower-skilled ICT jobs related to word processing and data entry while men dominate in more senior managerial, administration and design of networks, operating systems and software.

Internationally outsourced jobs, such as medical transcription work or software services, have made a considerable difference to women's work opportunities in developing countries. In the information technology sector, however, women make up a small percentage of managerial, maintenance, and design personnel in networks, operating systems and software. Little data is available on women's participation in computer science, engineering research and employment in the private sector as well as in research institutions.

ICT can support small-scale among women and assist poor women to improve the economic return of their traditional activities. Using the Internet, mobile telephony or satellite based radio, women can access and share valuable information, for example on markets. E-commerce initiatives can link women producers and traders directly to markets, allowing them to bypass and exploitative middlemen and local structures. Using CD-ROMs and distance learning, they can access training which improves their productivity and the quality of products.

- § *In Guyana, a women weavers' cooperative used the Internet to market hand-crafted hammocks, resulting in a very high income by local standards.*
- § *In Argentina, the non-governmental organization PROMEDU trained young women from a poor rural community in the use of ICT for improving the design and marketing of handicrafts, which helped them increase their sales.*
- § *The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India supports an artisan handicraft network of 5000 women who use village mobile phones to access market information.*

Although ICT have not yet had a significant impact on creating employment and generating income for very poor and marginalized women, particularly in rural areas, there is potential through increasing their engagement with ICT to expand social networks and introduce new modes of learning which can play a key role in overcoming poverty in the future.

ICT can facilitate the gender-sensitive achievement of MDG 2 on including through distance learning. Traditional ICT, such as radio and television, can be used to convey messages on the importance of primary school attendance, particularly in areas with strong social or cultural barriers to girls' attendance at school.

In many developing countries, computers are being introduced in schools as a tool to support the learning process. Gender-sensitive planning of ICT interventions is a precondition to ensure equal access and effective use of computers in the classroom environment by girls. Research has shown that classrooms are not free from gender bias. Proposed measures to correct this include encouraging schools to develop 'fair use' policies in computer labs, conducting gender sensitivity sessions for both teachers and students and advocating for reduced after-school duties of girls to give them more time.

- § *A study of schools in Uganda and Ghana found that girls did not enjoy equitable access to computer labs. High student-to-computer ratios, alongside first-come, first-served policies, disadvantaged girls who are typically heavily outnumbered by boys at the secondary level. Girls also had earlier curfew hours and domestic responsibilities that limited their access time.*

In all areas, training is needed to build the capacity of women to access and use new ICT, including through training for ICT-related jobs, as well as training for women in using ICT in their professions. That women have an interest in this type of training can be illustrated by the fact that women have outnumbered men in ICT-based training for teachers via distance learning in many countries. Training is also needed on ICT policies and regulations to allow women to participate more actively in national-level decision making on ICT. Many creative initiatives have been undertaken to increase women's access to training on ICT.

- § *In Afghanistan, for example, the Ministry for Women's Affairs, in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), established a computer training centre for women.*
- § *An InfoDev project, implemented by Cisco Systems and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) awards scholarships for young African women for training in Internet networking. The programme includes training on gender equality.*

In 2003, the Commission on the Status of Women recommended strengthening the capacity of _____ for the advancement of women to effectively utilize ICT and become involved in national, regional and international processes related to ICT, through the allocation of resources and the provision of technical expertise.

National machineries play an important role in advocating for, supporting and monitoring implementation of MDG3 and for the mainstreaming of gender perspectives into all other MDGs. However, they continue to face many constraints to implementing their work effectively, including in relation to mandates, power and resources. These constraints are reflected in access to, utilization of, and benefits from ICT, particularly in Africa.

The Division for the Advancement of Women, carried out a technical assistance project to develop the capacity of national machineries to take full advantage of new information and communications technologies to enhance their effectiveness in national policy-making and planning processes for gender equality, including in relation to implementation of the MDGs. This involved using ICT to strengthen networking, information sharing, and knowledge management. The project resulted in the establishment of a regional e-network for national machineries in Africa in December 2006, which includes a portal with information on all national machineries and opportunities for exchange of information and experiences through a general discussion list and through regular moderated substantive discussions on different themes.

The project, however, identified a number of critical constraints faced by national machineries in Africa, including: insufficient and adequate equipment and facilities, including lack of electricity/power supply and limited or no internet connection; insufficient training and human resources; a lack of financial resources for training and equipment purchase, particularly in the start up period; and the high cost of internet connection. Sustainability was also a major concern because of uncertain funding and high staff turnover. It is critical to address these constraints to ensure that the national machineries can play the intended key role in the achievement of MDG3, and in identifying and addressing the gender digital divide in their countries.

Recognizing the disadvantage and inequality faced by women and girls in relation to ICT, and finding creative ways to overcome the barriers to their full participation and benefit, is essential for ensuring that the MDGs can be achieved. An essential starting point is to ensure that in all efforts to use ICT to support achievement of the MDGs, the gender perspectives – the needs, priorities and contributions of women as well as men – are identified and explicitly

addressing them in research, data collection and analysis, and development of policies, strategies and programmes as well as in resource allocations and in monitoring and evaluation activities.