Women in the Information Society
Taking Gender Into Account

By Malgorzata Tarasiewicz

Historically, women have been left behind in the access to new opportunities and are second-class citizens in the process of empowerment brought by the digital era. The new information and communication technologies (ICTs), which could offer equal chances to their users, reflect the same inequality that has been present for decades between women and men.

There is a growing digital divide between the rich and the impoverished, between the developed and developing countries, and between countries with sound economies and those in transition. Since women constitute the majority of the poor in the world, this divide becomes even more gender-based. Besides the difficulty of access to hardware and software, women are rarely in decision-making positions in technology, and because of gender stereotypes, men dominate in management.

It is not exclusively for the benefit of women to take gender-justice into account when talking about access in the information society. For decades, policies have been designed to strengthen poor countries economically and democratically. It has been proven that gender perspectives have to be built into policies and actions in order to make them just and efficient tools for social change; nevertheless, the gender aspect in ICT development is often missing. ICTs have become a powerful and widespread tool for social development. "An equitable information society needs to be based on sustainable economic and social development and gender justice. It cannot be achieved solely through market forces".[1] The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process creates a possibility to secure gender perspectives in ICT policies.

Some recommendations relevant to the access of women to ICT have been made numerous times at UN conferences, many referring to economic and social empowerment. Women should decide for themselves how to use technology for their empowerment, should gain equal access to new employment opportunities and should have more decision-making positions in information technology. The use of ICT as an effective tool in distributing information and advocating gender equality should be promoted. Similar recommendations arise from the European Union's eEurope 2005 Action Plan, whose objective, among other things, is to give everyone the opportunity to participate in the global information society. What political will could trigger actions to attract women to make use of the Internet, increase the number of Internet access points with special focus on attracting women (e.g., in Poland there are only three so-called telecentres),[2] and provide affordable access for low-income groups?

Where can funding be obtained to improve Internet literacy among elderly women, receive support for those with disabilities to use digital technologies, run surveys to gather data on the use of ICTs by women, set up portals with information on women's health, training possibilities and jobs, and offer training on the use of ICTs in their everyday life, as well as in social and political activities and work?

There are several positive examples of the use of ICTs for the empowerment of women, enumerated at the Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting in Seoul in November 2002. However, according to the Group's report, "although some national governments, women's NGOs [non-governmental organizations], private sector companies, and the international community have implemented programmes and projects that expand women's ability to enjoy fully and equitably access to these opportunities, there is room for considerable improvement".

Women NGOs have clearly stressed the urgent need to ensure that women are able to make use of ICTs for social and economic empowerment, through the introduction of necessary policies and by ensuring adequate financial resources for policy implementation. The national governments and the international institutions should allocate budgets for ICT projects for women.

WSIS provides a unique opportunity to draw the attention of national governments, international institutions and the world community to these issues. The Expert Group stated: "All stakeholders must take urgent action to ensure that gender equality and women's rights are integrated into the WSIS and its follow-up programmes. Unless these actions are taken, there is a grave risk that the Summit will not succeed in its aim of creating a vision of the information society that contributes to human development." ❏

Notes

1   NGO Gender Strategies Working Group, Commission on the Status of Women, Action Items for Gender Equality in the Information Society).
2   Network of East-West Women Polska (*www.neww.org.pl*).

Malgorzata Tarasiewicz is founder of Network of East-West Women and Executive Director of Network of East-West Women Polska. She was also Chairperson of Amnesty International Poland.