

## **The Role of ICT Policy in Empowering and Protecting the Rights of the Girl Child**

**Parallel event at the  
Fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women  
5 March 2007**

**Opening Statement by Ms. Carolyn Hannan, Director  
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Distinguished participants,  
Colleagues and Friends,

I am pleased to address this seminar on “The role of ICT policy in empowering and protecting the rights of the girl child”. The seminar, organized as a parallel event to the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), is part of UNITAR's Web Seminar Series on “ICT Policy Issues for Development”. I congratulate UNITAR for taking this initiative.

The Commission on the Status of Women continues its efforts to ensure a strong focus on national level implementation of its policy recommendations, including through the large number of opportunities provided during its sessions for interactive dialogue and exchange of experiences and lessons learned. In this context, the Commission encourages the organization of parallel events as a means to enrich its work. It particularly welcome those focused on the priority themes under consideration.

The priority theme for this session of the Commission is "The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child". The Commission will adopt new policy recommendations on this theme at the conclusion of the session. Under its new working methods, the Commission will also review implementation of these policy recommendations in 2-3 years time, to assess progress and identify continuing gaps and challenges. This provides an opportunity to ensure that critical issues related to girls and ICT are given attention in the policy recommendations adopted by the Commission and to monitor and report on progress when the Commission returns to the theme in 2-3 years time.

The Commission on the Status of Women has previously given attention to the issue of women and information and communication technology (ICT), most recently in 2003. The Commission called for increased access to and use of ICT by women and girls, provision of resources for ICT programmes and projects that promote gender equality, and measures to combat ICT and media based violence against women and girls. 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 the empowerment of women and girls and the promotion of gender equality.

The policy recommendations adopted by the Commission were forwarded to the World Summit on the Information Society WSIS I in Geneva in 2003 to ensure increased

attention to gender perspectives in the discussions and outcome of the summit. The Declaration of Principles, adopted at WSIS I, reaffirmed that ICT provided enormous opportunities and that women should be partners and key actors in the information society. The WSIS II in Tunis in 2005 recognized that a gender divide exists as part of the digital divide in society and reaffirmed commitment to women's empowerment and to incorporating a gender perspective in ICT to overcome this divide.

The "gender divide" is reflected not only in the lower numbers of women and girls using ICT, compared to men and boys, but also in the persistence of gender-specific structural inequalities, in particular the inequalities between women and men at all levels of decision-making, that constrain women's participation in shaping the role of ICT as a tool for equality and development. If gender perspectives are not given specific attention in the development of policies, regulatory frameworks and programmes, ICT can perpetuate existing gender-based inequalities, for example in opportunities for access to information, education, and employment, and can even create new inequalities. The use of the ICT to perpetuate violence against women and girls, and to develop new forms of violence, is of increasing concern at global, regional and national levels.

Much of the attention to the gender perspectives of ICT has been focused on women and there has been little explicit attention to girls. This is evident in the work of the Commission and the efforts in the context of the WSIS I and II. In preparing its report, "Women 2000 and Beyond: Gender Equality and empowerment of women through ICT", the Division for the Advancement of Women also found relatively little material with an explicit focus on girls. Most references are to "women", or "women and girls", and there is little information available on the specific situation of girls and their priorities and needs in relation to ICT.

The international community has recognized that the empowerment of girls is key to breaking the cycle of discrimination and violence and protecting and promoting their human rights. ICT provide unique opportunities for girls' empowerment by improving access to information on health, nutrition, education, and other human development opportunities, and by creating new opportunities for social interaction, including peer exchange and bottom-up communication.

In the ten-year review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2005, many Member States reported on actions taken to increase access to and utilization of ICT by women and girls and to ensure full benefits of ICT. They provided examples from the areas of education and health and reported on initiatives to effectively use ICT for awareness raising on critical issues such as trafficking and harmful traditional practices. At this session of the Commission, many Member States have indicated increasing awareness of negative utilization of ICT to the detriment of the rights of girls and of the need to develop clear strategies to address this problem. Member States have also, importantly, recognized that ICT can be an extremely effective instrument for promoting and protecting the rights of girls and ensuring their empowerment. Examples of successful initiatives taken at national level to support the empowerment of girls through ICT have been shared.

Despite the many successful initiatives undertaken at different levels, gaps remain with regard to girls' access and use of ICT. Fewer girls than boys access and use ICT, and girls continue to be underrepresented in ICT courses, computer clubs and ICT-based careers. Challenges that constrain both girls' access to ICT and their ability to use ICT effectively for their empowerment, include high illiteracy rates, low educational levels, and lack of skills training. The low enrolment of girls in scientific and technological studies constitutes one of the main obstacles to access to employment in information technology. Lack of attention to the specific needs of girls in policy-making, development of regulatory mechanisms and planning of concrete activities can limit the access of girls to ICT. For example, the planning of public ICT facilities, such as telecentres, information centres and cybercafés, often does not consider the constraints girls face, such as inappropriate opening times (including evenings), inadequate security (location in poorly lighted areas) and lack of transport. All of these constraints must be tackled if ICT is to be an effective instrument for the empowerment of girls.

The potential of ICT to empower girls and foster equality between boys and girls has clearly not been systematically and effectively harnessed. This event provides a unique opportunity to share good practices and lessons learned on the use of ICT to protect and empower girls. I hope the discussions will lead to the very concrete ideas on actions needed to ensure the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. I wish you a very successful meeting.

Thank you