



LOBBY EUROPEEN DES FEMMES EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY

Contribution of the European Women's Lobby to the CSW

March 2003

“Participation and access of women to the media, and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement of women”

The Beijing World Conference on Women identified media, including information and communication technologies, as one of the critical areas of concern for gender equality and the empowerment of women. The five year follow up of the commitments made in Beijing further pointed to the need to integrate a gender perspective and to adapt the growing information and knowledge based society to women's needs in order to be a tool for transforming gender relations and promote social development. The ongoing process of preparations for the first ever World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) makes it even more essential at this point to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment are integrated into the policies determining the development of the Information society.

1. Background

The capacity to amplify and access information and diffuse knowledge is what underpins the development of the so-called knowledge based society and is one of the features of globalisation. In this context, poverty of information becomes more and more a source of all forms of exclusion. Structural inequalities between women and men become marked, and even risk being perpetuated, along with other structural inequalities. These developments make the control, production, and dissemination of information important issues to address. It is essential for women to fully participate and gain access to all means of communication and public expression, including the mass media, non-commercial access to broadcasting spectrum and information and communications technology.

The possibility for information and communication enhanced by new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs - usually understood as technologies that allow for digital contents, but also radio, television, and mobile telephone) is rapidly transforming social, economic, cultural, and political interactions all over the world. Therefore, closing

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the digital divide and ensuring that the benefits of the new technologies be available to all becomes fundamental.

The merging and privatisation of media, especially in the context of globalisation, is changing the structure of the media industry. Media has become a transnationalised business enterprise tied to international trade and the function of media as a public service is threatened and undermined. The growing corporatisation and privatisation of both traditional media and ICTs poses serious threats to gender equality initiatives, decreasing the potential of using these as a means for women's empowerment. Information becomes just another merchandise in the transnational profit-making corporations who are responsible primarily to their shareholders. Ownership concentrated in the hands of a few, and access restricted to those who can pay. The Internet, once a promising new public sphere, is increasingly commercialised and controlled.

1.1 Constraints

In the mainstream mass media, women are largely portrayed to the public view in selective, stereotyped, and often disempowering manner, and a majority of the world's women are simply invisible. Women's viewpoints and concerns are highly underrepresented. The rapid expansion in use and development of information and communication technologies is making it increasingly apparent that the benefits are unequally distributed – globally, regionally, and between different groups in society. The gender divide in access and influence on the development of the information society is one of the most important power asymmetries in this context.

Women's access and participation in relation to media and ICTs is also determined by factors such as illiteracy, poverty, urban-rural communities, language issues, and disabilities. Addressing these issues must be an integral part of developing policy frameworks that aim for equality in access and participation. Without the right policy framework and support for new and transformative practices inequalities will continue to develop along the existing power structures or even be exacerbated.

Furthermore, the large and growing reality of violence against women and its representation and amplification both in mass media, as well as in the development of new communication platforms is a serious issue that policy-makers must address. The Internet is currently used as a platform for traffickers in women and pimps. The explosion of pornography on the Internet equally raises serious questions about how to ensure that violence against women is not perpetuated.

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1.2 Opportunities

Women media practitioners are on the increase in most parts of the world, both in mainstream and in alternative media. In community media, women play important roles, both in conducting and planning the programming and in its decision-making processes. In mainstream mass media, some countries have put in place policy mechanisms to evaluate and produce more gender balanced content, as well as combating gender stereotyping.

The development of the Internet and new technologies has proven to be enabling means for women in their work to promote gender equality in different ways. As information and communication tools, ICTs have potential for participation, networking and advocacy, which have been increasingly exploited by women's groups. In the context of increased commercialisation and privatisation of mainstream media the development of ICTs and the Internet have also provided an important information platform for visibility, where women's alternative media initiatives have found a space to publish and exchange contents, which provides gender analysis and information focusing on women. Furthermore, the potential to foster increased transparency and accountability between women citizen's and governments is another possibility that remains to be developed.

2. Policy actions are needed

Despite the objectives set in the Beijing Platform for Action and the commitments made at the five-year follow-up of the Beijing conference in 2000, there has been little commitment from either public or private institutions to address women's situation concerning media and ICTs. By now it is widely acknowledged that the development of new technologies does not take into consideration women's practices and needs, and as a result, women have been more disadvantaged than men by technological advances and by various programmes put in place.

It is therefore time for policy-makers and other stakeholders, in close collaboration with women's movements, to make a critical assessment of the existing policy frameworks, with the objectives of making the media and information society and the development of new technologies actively support the advancement of women's rights. This is not only an issue that can be reduced to access, but a more profound questioning and a process of ensuring that media and ICTs are used to enhance gender equality and women's capacities.

All governments should commit to formulating Action Plans with the objective of making the media and information society and the development of new

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technologies actively support gender equality, respect of women's human rights, and women's empowerment.

2.1 Mass media and gender equality

Comprehensive policy frameworks and regulatory mechanisms need to be put in place in order to make the media a useful tool to promote and contribute to greater gender justice, respect for women's human rights, sustainable development, and a culture of peace.

Ø Governments need to formulate standards, based on equality between women and men that should be reflected in all communication productions, including programming and media portrayal.

Ø Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be put in place in order to halt sexism and gender-based stereotypes in mass media, including strengthened policies against sexist images in publicity.

Ø Governments must develop policies for the safeguarding and development of public broadcasting, community based media, women's alternative media, and alternative print media in order to counteract the negative trends of the commercialisation of information in national and transnational media and ICT corporations.

Ø Governments and relevant bodies should implement programmes that will increase women's access to media, including assigning resources to promote gender equality through the use of both mainstream and alternative media.

Ø Governments should put in place policies and financial support, including within international cooperation programmes, with regard to support the strengthening of women's communication and media initiatives.

Ø Gender balance need to be established at all decision-making levels within the media industry. This could be achieved through measures such as affirmative action and quota systems.

Ø A media critical analysis should be supported, in order to raise awareness of both audiences and journalists on how gender power asymmetries are at play in the media. Feminist analysis should be made an integral part of the curriculum in journalism schools.

2.2 ICT policy frameworks and gender equality

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The current policy frameworks for the Information and communication society and for the development of new technologies have largely been focused on economic aspects. At this point it is urgent to strengthen the notion of knowledge and information as a common good, which must not be left to private interests to control. It is therefore urgent to re-formulate both National and International policy frameworks in order to integrate all aspects of the digital information society, with specific emphasis on the means to support gender equality, human rights and sustainable development. These policies should especially ensure the following:

Ø Democratic and transparent governance of the information society from local to global levels with the aim of ensuring affordable access to, and effective use of, electronic networks in a context of social development and gender justice, for instance by innovative regulation and public investment.

Ø National and international policies should always be subject to Gender Impact assessments and evaluation as to their capacities to contribute to gender equality, and to ensure that they are accountable to women's needs.

Ø Governments should revise their policies on financial support and international cooperation with regard to giving priority to the strengthening of women's communication networks and use of new technologies.

Ø Policies must support women's equal involvement in the definition, design, and development of new technologies.

ICT as an instrument for women's participation

In order to reinforce women's role in shaping the developments of society at all levels, there is a need to develop policy frameworks that actively support women's participation in all spheres related to the Information Society and the development of new technology.

Ø The right to communicate must be acknowledged as a fundamental right, without which women will not be able to fully take their role as actors in shaping society.
Ø Support for women's strategic use of ICTs to further women's political agendas, including reinforced solidarity campaigns, networking, and support women's rights to participate equally in civil and public life.

Ø Governments and relevant bodies should commit resources to support women through community Internet, computer networking.

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Ø All policies must ensure a strategy for ensuring women's equal access to all aspects of ICTs, including prioritising basic connectivity and infrastructure.

ICT as an instrument for women's capacity building
In order to full enhance the developments of new technologies and support women's capacity building, policy-makers and other stakeholders must:

Ø Ensure the involvement and full consultation of women in planning and decision making on ICT policies and projects to ensure relevance to the communities and agendas they work with.

Ø Develop programmes by and for women, accompanied by sufficient resources, including education, training, and skills development in relation to ICTs.

Ø Fully take into account and integrate women's needs and priorities in the programmes of distance learning, life-long education, development of alternatives to formal education, and community based learning.

ICTs and women's economic empowerment

ICTs and the knowledge-based society must increasingly promote women's economic initiatives and possibilities to economic empowerment. Currently the ICT sector is heavily male dominated and sex-segregated; Women are disproportionately found in low paid and insecure jobs.

Ø Policies for the development of the knowledge-based economy must address the working conditions for women in growing sectors such as telework, and work- from home.

Ø ICT policies should support the increased involvement of women in the emerging employment sectors.

Ø Development of policies in support of women's economic initiatives in the ICT sector.