The Beijing World Conference on Women, ICT Policy, and Gender

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INTRODUCTION

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, addressed gender equality issues in many areas of global society, including information, communication, and knowledge exchange and the associated technologies. The Beijing Declaration called for action to promote gender equality in human rights, economic autonomy, domestic responsibility sharing, participation in public life and decision making, access to health services and education, and the eradication of poverty and all forms of violence against women. The Beijing Platform for Action contained strategic objectives and actions for governments and others to implement to increase gender equality in 12 critical areas, including Section J, Women and the Media. Article 234 of the Beijing Platform Section J acknowledged the important need for gender equality in information and communication technology:

advances in information technology have facilitated a global network of communications that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. (United Nations [UN], 1995, p. 133)

Section J defined two strategic objectives that address issues of access to and participation in ICT and media development.

J.1. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.

J.2. Promote a balanced and nonstereotyped portrayal of women in the media. (United Nations, 1995, pp. 133-136)

Governments agreed to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and use gender-disaggregated data to report national progress on objectives during Beijing +5 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) in 2000 and Beijing +10 in 2005. This article reviews progress reported on ICT-related Section J strategic initiatives and trends for ICT and gender between 1995 and 2005.

BACKGROUND

The gender equality objectives in Section J have been rooted in international agreements among United Nations member nations since 1947. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognized that "the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (UN, 1948, p. 1). UDHR Article 19 affirms the right to communicate and "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (UN, 1948, p. 1). These human rights, equally inalienable for women and men, are affirmed in the international treaty Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW; UN Commission on the Status of Women, 1979). Prior to the Beijing conference, CEDAW was referenced in the preamble preceding the 1989 UNESCO Convention on Technical and Vocational Education, which "provides for the right to equal access to technical education and pays special attention to the needs of disadvantaged groups" (Hamelink, 2005, p. 128).

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women organized four world conferences on women. The first was in Mexico in 1975 at the beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women and focused on equality, development, and peace with the subthemes of employment, health, and education. The second was in Copenhagen in 1980. The third, in Nairobi in 1985, produced the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985), which affirmed that the:

realization of equal rights for women at all levels and in all areas of life will contribute to the achievement of a just and lasting peace, to social progress and to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. (United Nations, 1985, p. 1)

Beijing 1995

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 built on the Nairobi strategies and created the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). Just prior to Beijing, the United Nations Commission on Science Technology and Development Gender Working Group (UNCSTD-GWG, 1995) compiled research on gender, science, and technology interactions, particularly on applications that serve basic needs in the developing world. Most of the case studies focused on technical change that had differentially impacted the lives of women and men, and found men benefiting more from technical change. Further analysis identified male dominance in the decision-making chain as a prime reason for gender inequalities (UNCSTD-GWG). The Beijing Platform for Action helped situate gender equality as central in the global development-policy agenda by creating a gender-sensitive policy framework for achieving development goals through action targeted to human needs. Governments agreed to the Beijing Platform for Action and committed some resources to implement the objectives of its 12 target areas and to monitor progress at 5-year intervals.

Beijing + 5

The Beijing Platform for Action Section J had affirmed the importance of gender inclusion in ICT policy development at local, national, regional, and international levels. By 2000, policies to direct the ICT tools, so celebrated for their potential to effect change in developing nations, were only sparsely implemented toward programs for women's development. UNIFEM executive director Noleen Heyzer (2000) voiced concern that "globalization has failed to generate formal employment for women, but instead shifted their work to the informal and casual sectors." She stressed the "pressing need to assist countries to develop new frameworks that transform globalization to become pro-poor and pro-women, a globalization that is more socially accountable" and to utilize "the possibilities for connecting women and markets worldwide through the democratization of information and communication technologies and policies." She addressed the issue of the representation of women and called for greater gender equity in "expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication."

Toward this objective, UNIFEM partnered with Cisco Systems to host the gender and ICT session at the Beijing +5 UNGASS. The session reported on women's leadership in ICT capacity building and information sharing for development. Discussion focused on best-practice action programs for the Section J objectives expanded to include ICT. New media ICT access and participation had moved toward gender equality in ICT-rich nations. In ICT-poor nations, data were less available. Many cases were reported of women's empowerment through ICTs for education, political voice and decision making, employment, and capacity development, but key obstacles of poverty and illiteracy kept most women in developing countries from ICT access and participation (United Nations, 2000).

The United Nations (2000) report on trends and statistics published for Beijing +5 identified the "need for new data on new media" (p. 100) and found new media boundaries are blurred between "genres and delivery systems" and "producers and users" (p. 100). Support for gender equality in hiring and gender sensitivity in programming was recommended in order to address escalating trends of gender stereotyping, pornography, and other degrading images of women and girls in media. The 2000 report also found "almost no data" (p. 100) on gender portrayal in new media, including Internet broadcasts, games, and newsgroups. The report recommended the development of complex mea-