WSIS Gender and ICT Policy

J. Ann Dumas
The Pennsylvania State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was organized by the United Nations (UN) and the International Telecommunications Union to address the need for international policy and agreement on ICT governance, rights, and responsibilities. It convened in two phases: Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. International representatives of governments, businesses, and civil society raised issues, and debated and formed policy recommendations. The WSIS Gender Caucus (2003) and other civil-society participants advocated for gender equality to be included as a fundamental principle for action and decision making. The voting plenary session of delegates produced the *WSIS Declaration of Principles* (UN, 2003a) and *WSIS Plan of Action* (UN, 2003b) in Geneva, with gender included in many of the articles.

Two major issues WSIS addressed in Geneva and Tunis were Internet governance and the Digital Solidarity Fund. UN secretary general Kofi Annan established the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) to define Internet and Internet governance to "navigate the complex terrain" (GKP, 2002, p. 6) and to make recommendations for WSIS in Tunis in 2005. WGIG addressed three Internet-governance functions: technical standardization; resources allocation and assignment, such as domain names; and policy formation and enforcement, and dispute resolution. Relevant issues not initially addressed by WGIG included gender, voice, inclusiveness, and other issues rooted in unequal access to ICT and to the decision-making process including governance, now shaping the information society. On February 23, a joint statement on Internet governance was presented in Geneva at the Tunis Prepcom by the Civil Society Internet Governance Caucus, the Gender Caucus, Human Rights Caucus, Privacy Caucus, and Media Caucus on behalf of the Civil Society Content and Themes Group. The statement

asserts, "gender balanced representation in all aspects of Internet Governance is vital for the process and for its outcomes to have legitimacy" (WSIS Gender Caucus, 2005a).

The Digital Solidarity Fund was proposed at WSIS, and the UN Task Force on Financial Mechanisms for ICT for Development was formed. In the 1990s, official development-assistance (ODA) support declined for ICT infrastructure development. In the new millennium, this decline has been offset by funds to integrate ICT programs into development (Hesselbarth & Tambo, 2005). The WSIS Gender Caucus (2003) statement on financing mechanisms affirmed that ICT for development must be framed as a development issue, "encompassing market-led growth but fundamentally a public policy issue." Public finance is central to achieving "equitable and gender just outcomes in ICT for development."

This article examines the WSIS political dynamics over the issue of gender equality as a fundamental principle for action in ICT policy. The WSIS civil-society participants, particularly the Gender Caucus, continued to advocate for gender equality as a fundamental principle for action and decision making within the multiple-stakeholder WSIS process of government delegates and private-sector representatives.

BACKGROUND

The WSIS Gender Caucus was formed at the 2002 WSIS African regional preparatory meeting. The WSIS Gender Caucus presented the following six recommendations for action to the WSIS voting plenary session in the spirit of "creating richness in the information society through inclusion, diversity and gender equality." Gender equality must be a fundamental principle for action. There must be equitable participation in decisions shaping the information society. New and old ICTs must be accessed

in a multimodal approach. ICTs must be designed to serve people. ICT empowerment for women and girls is necessary for full participation. Research analysis and evaluation must guide action. These recommendations helped inform the development of the WSIS platform for action.

Many civil-society representatives lobbied the voting delegates for the inclusion of gender equality as a fundamental principle for action in ICT policy. The WSIS Gender Caucus, the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group (NGOGSWG), and other representatives to WSIS advocated for gender equality, basing arguments on the precedent agreements of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR of 1948), Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW; UN Commission on the Status of Women, 1979), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA; UN, 1995), and the Millennium Development Goal commitments of 2000.

Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) helped to structure and coordinate the WSIS civil-society participants at WSIS in the ICT4D civil-society forum. GKP (2002) made recommendations to the digital opportunity task force, an initiative of the G8 nations in 2000, to expand the "digital revolution" to the underserved, particularly women, rural residents, and youth in developing areas. Gender inclusion and mainstreaming were recommended:

GKP experience suggests that gender mainstreaming should be a component of every ICT project to ensure sustainability. A gender perspective must be built into plans, policy and practice, from preliminary project design through implementation and evaluation. The following case studies show that women who are involved in meaningful ICT projects improve their economic and/or social well being in the community. (GKP, 2002, p. 6)

The WSIS Gender Caucus and the NGOGSWG gender advocacy produced results in the documents of the Geneva phase of WSIS. The *WSIS Declaration of Principles* states that the common vision of the information society includes the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) challenges: "promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women;

reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health" (ITU, 2005, p. 9).

The documents state that gender equality and sustainable social and economic development are crucial for an equitable information society. Civil-society involvement is acknowledged as key to creating broad-based acceptance and therefore sustainable policy and plans for the information society. Civil society has also developed significant content and provision for a critical perspective. The *WSIS Plan of Action* calls for the removal of gender barriers and the development of gender-sensitive capacity building, e-learning and e-health, and early intervention programmes in science and technology that "target young girls to increase the number of women in ICT careers" (ITU, 2005, p. 45).

The WSIS Gender Caucus contributed to the UN Commission on the Status of Women's Beijing +10 review of the platform for action. Section J: Women and Media called for gender equality in media creation and delivery. The caucus reported on how radio, telecenters, and teleconferencing had enabled experts to share knowledge with rural women in agriculture and to respond to information needs. The caucus stressed the value of these ICTs in helping to deliver services to women in health, education, agricultural extension, law, and social justice. Women's participation helps to ensure that women benefit. Woman can demand more accountable governance with transparent information access, and can participate more fully informed in public discourse. ICT can help empower women as development tools for better business, education, and governance participation. All the new ICTs and media provide connection and networking spaces where women can find voice, own and control information and knowledge, and tackle issues of everyday life, sometimes in new and innovative ways (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development [UNRISD], 2005).

Economic disempowerment and illiteracy are major issues of gender inequality that impact ICT in policy and practice. Two thirds of the world's poor and undereducated are women. Even among the 55 countries with the highest United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), the ratio of estimated female to male earned income ranged between 34:100 and 74:100. Sweden

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