E-QUALITY FOR WOMEN

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In May 2002, African entrepreneurs who are successfully running IT companies abroad came together in Kampala, Uganda, to discuss specific ways to respond to, and help bridge, the digital divide that particularly affects African women. Forging new partnerships to support African women in the use of information technologies, they were joined by representatives from eight African governments, NEPAD, civil society and the UN system. The launch of this Digital Diaspora Initiative was organised by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in collaboration with UN partners – the UN Development Programme, the UN Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries, and the UN ICT Task Force.

The participants developed the Kampala Declaration, in which they outlined concrete steps for the creation of an enabling ICT environment for women, calling amongst other things, for:

✧ Improved market access and infrastructure development;

✧ Strong political commitment in order to achieve the potential of ICTs as a tool for equitable and gender-responsive development;

✧ National Advisory Teams on Women and ICT, with representatives from governments, the private sector, the UN system and civil society;

✧ Development of a consortium of Diaspora teams to provide assistance to country initiatives in nine pilot countries.

A first concrete initiative is currently being established in Rwanda, one of the pilot countries, where Digital Diaspora trainers will share their expertise and technical know-how with women organizations throughout the country. Plans for similar efforts in Eritrea are under way.

Innovative, cross-sectoral partnerships like the Digital Diaspora Initiative are needed to capitalise on the potential of ICTs to lift women out of poverty and provide a means for their economic security. While it is widely recognised that the digital divide threatens to increase inequalities between rich and poor, it is not sufficiently understood that the digital divide also runs between women and men. Women are dramatically affected by higher illiteracy rates; they lack ICT training and access because of their productive, reproductive

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and community management roles; they have less access to financial resources than their male counterparts; and they are constrained by socio-cultural inhibitions that consider them less capable of understanding and operating technologies.

It is becoming clear that without active intervention by gender advocates, new ICTs are unlikely to make the kinds of positive contributions to gender equality, sustainable development and democratisation that have been touted. In particular, attention needs to be paid to the extent to which women and gender concerns are shaping the regulatory and policy environments that will ultimately determine the utility and relevance of these technologies to poverty eradication efforts. Policy decisions will be central to determining how ICTs facilitate greater incomes and opportunities for women, with regulation being of vital interest for the advocates of gender equality in ICT in two areas in particular: *universal access* and *affordable services*. Technology choices, infrastructure, pricing and tariffs can be examined and calibrated to make sure that women are not excluded from the benefits of access to ICT.

Lessons learned from pilot initiatives will help to inform the decisions of policy-makers. At UNIFEM, we have been working for the past several years to support diverse uses by women of new and traditional ICTs, recognising their potential to support organisation and commerce within and between countries and communities. **Content**, **Connection**, **Capability**, and **Control** make up UNIFEM's work around ICTs. Rather than being distinct components, they underlie an overall approach to gender and ICTs.

CONTENT

For women, content is directly linked to use. If women are to be able to make use of the internet for income-generation, education or advocacy, there must be more relevant content. This includes both substance and languages. Women are producers as well as consumers of information and knowledge and this is an important area of support. As long as we see women as merely the consumers of technologies, or technologies as essentially neutral in their design, technology projects will fail to make a noticeable difference in the balance of power that underlies, perpetuates and is often at the core of feminised poverty. UNIFEM has supported the establishment of several websites that provide spaces for women to network, exchange information and receive training on issues ranging from women's human rights to regional development. Arab Women Connect is one such example (see box, right).

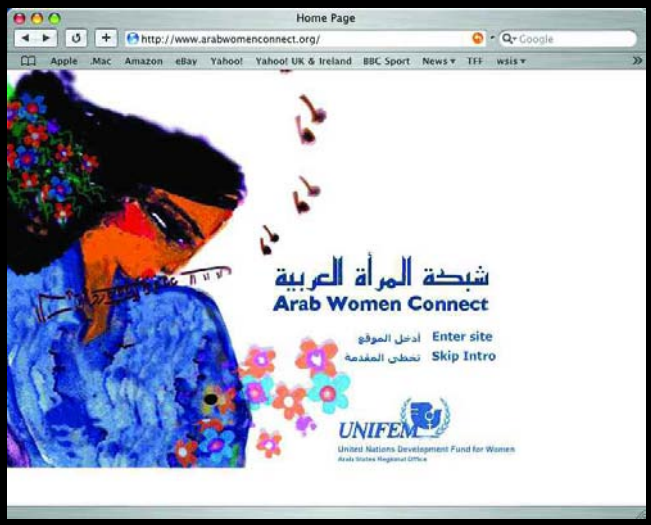
Building content

Arab Women Connect was launched by the United Nations Development Fund for Women as part of a regional strategy to increase Arab women's use of and influence on new information and communication technologies.

The website contains information on Arab women in English and Arabic, including news items on women's issues as well as background documents, and links to other relevant sites.

It also provides comprehensive databases of local women's organisations and experts on development issues. In addition, the site includes several interactive features such as bilingual mailing lists, discussion fora on specific issues and bulletin boards.

To date, women's organisations in Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinan Territories, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, United Arab Emirates and Qatar have joined this initiative which can be found at www.arabwomenconnect.org



Building capability

In Jordan, UNIFEM's partnership with Cisco Systems and the Jordanian Government has helped shape a gender-sensitive curriculum for 10 Cisco Networking Academy Programmes.

The programme aims to increase women's access to high-quality jobs in the IT sector. Close to 65% of the students currently enrolled are women.

Balqa Applied University incorporated the Cisco Networking Academy Programme into its curriculum as a compulsory course and other Jordanian academies are following. The joint initiative also undertook a comprehensive research report on Jordanian Women in the ICT Space that provides a gender-analysis of opportunities and challenges in the ICT environment and examines the present status of Jordan's ICT sector.

In September 2003, 400 participants graduated from the UNIFEM/CISCO 'Achieving E-Quality in the IT-Sector' programme. During an ICT Career Day, graduates had the opportunity to get in touch with potential employers.

CONNECTION

Greater connection and exchange within and between countries and continents, between women's organisations and global policymakers made possible by ICTs, are opening real opportunities for women. Stories of global campaigns conducted via e-mail, or of women at grassroots level using the Web to get the latest prices on their products are real. For example, UNIFEM has supported the creation of a Global Gender Caucus working to engender the WSIS process. The Caucus was largely shaped through the web-based mobilisation of gender and ICT activists around the world, springing from the WSIS Africa regional preparatory meeting in May 2002. Another example is an End-Violence electronic discussion group that UNIFEM helped establish in collaboration with the Educational Development Center. Yet we must remember that, because connection often remains limited to certain groups, the risks of exclusion and its effects are also real.

The End-Violence electronic working group proved highly successful as a forum for the exchange of information on strategies, best practices, policies and programmes addressing violence against women: more than 2,500 subscribers from some 90 countries joined the group. The discussions centered on issues ranging from legislation to available services, the role of the media and male responsibility in the elimination of violence against women.

CAPABILITY

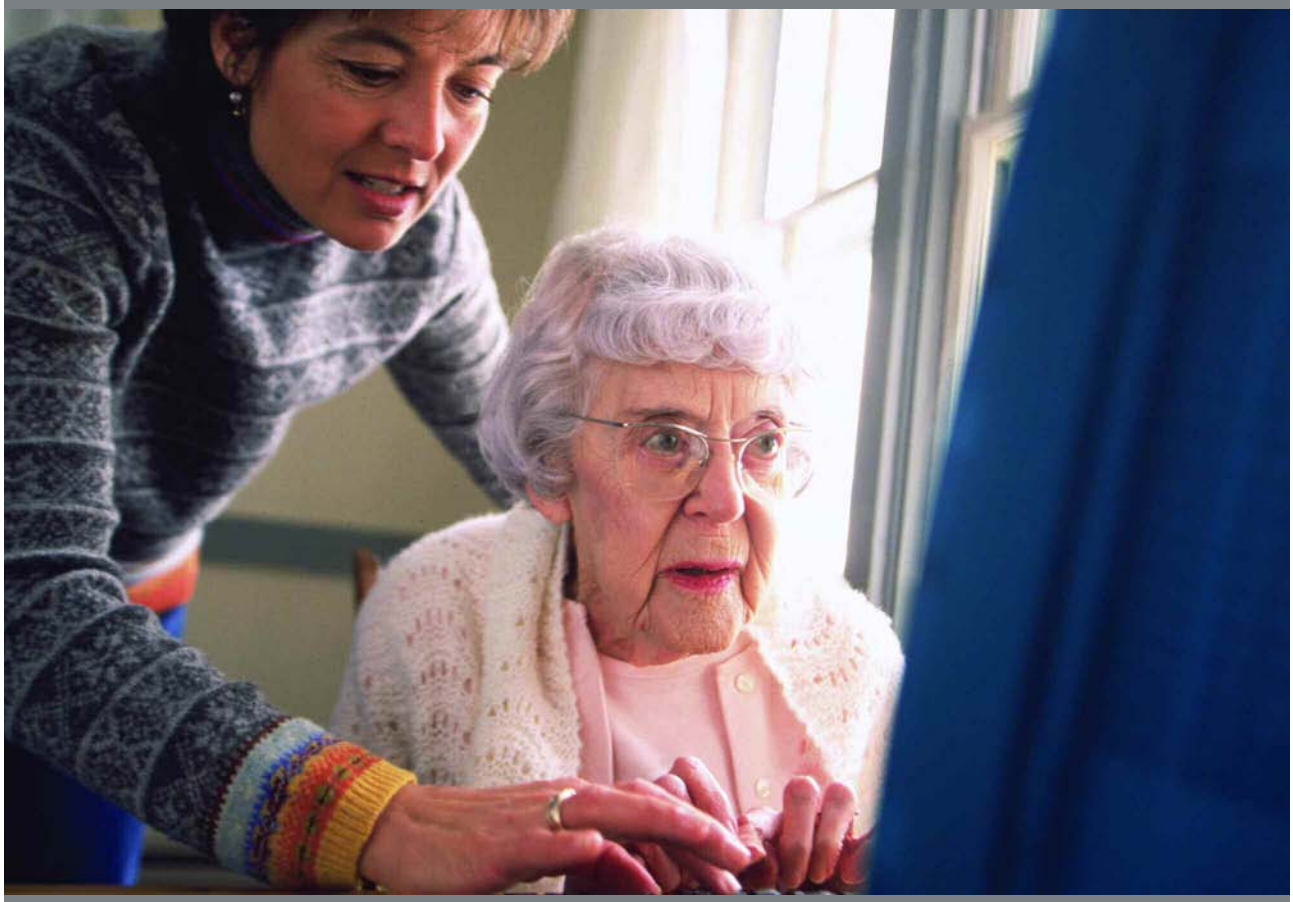
Building the capability of women to take advantage of new opportunities and new technologies is essential. But capability has a number of dimensions: it includes not only whether women are coming to the telecentre or are able to use a computer, but the extent to which women can be *leaders* in software design. Equally critical is to build a network of women and men who understand the ICT regulatory and policy environment and can advocate for gender equality in technology development and design. The ability to participate in decision-making processes, to have voices for gender equality in the direction of ICT development, deployment and regulation – from government to industry – is also closely tied to a better understanding of the gender dimensions of ICTs and the availability of sex-disaggregated data on the ICT sector.

CONTROL

The final 'C' – control – refers precisely to women's ability to have a voice in the direction of ICT development, deployment, and regulation. There are at least three sets of policymakers that have significant influence on ICT development and require strong gender perspectives and greater participation by women: top management in private sector companies; economic and social development decision-makers; and those concerned with science and technology planning.

THE FUTURE

UNIFEM is committed to ensuring that particularly poor women are not excluded from the benefits of ICTs. We know the cost of exclusion, and it is too high. Those who remain excluded from the digital revolution will also be excluded from an increasingly globalised and IT-based job, trade and production market, thereby missing out on many possibilities to enhance their economic security and contribute to the overall development of their communities, regions and countries. ICTs have the potential to help women increase their productivity and efficiency, building on their existing income-generating activities and enabling them to access new employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in the information economy. To bridge the gender digital divide, capital is needed – not only financial, but also *intellectual* capital. The major barriers we have to overcome are not technological but human – they depend on the political will and commitment to facilitate women's access not only to e-mail, e-commerce and e-jobs, but to 'E-quality'. ■



It's never too late to learn: ICT offers a wealth of opportunities for the elderly

E-quality for the elderly

The elderly are, potentially, amongst the greatest beneficiaries of ICT. As their mobility declines, so the ability of ICT to overcome distance and deliver services such as post, banking, shopping and healthcare directly to their home becomes even more valuable.

Coupled with the intellectual stimulus which ICT affords through access to online learning and all the information available on the World Wide Web, and the extensive new opportunities for contact with friends and relatives, ICT can dramatically improve the overall quality of life for old people.

The key is to ensure that – as sight, hearing and cognitive facilities deteriorate – the new technologies should be simple to learn and easy to use.

CASE STUDY: THE CSOKONAI COMMUNITY CENTRE, HUNGARY

The Csokonai Community Centre was the first to offer computer courses for the elderly in Hungary. Since February 2002, the centre has been delivering a high quality, easy-to-follow computer course tailored to the specific needs of the elderly.

The five-week courses are held once a week and take two hours. Groups are small (4-6 people) to enable the trainer to give one-to-one supervision. The course is made up of the following modules:

1. The history of the computer
2. How to operate the computer
3. Windows
4. Word processing
5. Internet and e-mail

Trainers put a great emphasis on generating discussions and giving the students the opportunity to work in groups. As a result, the participants not only learn from each other but also form new friendships. As students, they are notably hardworking and eager to learn.