

CONNECT A SCHOOL CONNECT A COMMUNITY

TOOLKIT MODULE

Community ICT Centers for Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, community ICT centers have gained prominence as physical hubs for bringing the benefits of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to communities where the technological infrastructure is inadequate or the costs of individual technology access are relatively high. ICT centers provide opportunities for access to information by overcoming the barriers of distance and location, fostering social cohesion and interaction.

These centers may be purpose-built around the provision of digitized and wireless services, or alternatively, digitization and connectivity might be integrated into an existing information or learning center. Ideally, community ICT centers do not function as isolated information stations. Rather, as the name suggests, they form part of existing facilities and institutions, such as health centers, schools, libraries and other hubs that provide a mix of services for the community. There are many different models of these kinds of physical hubs, and this module attempts to illustrate a range – particularly those that deliberately engage with women users.

Why is it important to engage women and girls? The simple answer to this question is that women and girls need to be deliberately selected as an audience because they still make up the larger proportion of those left behind – whether in literacy education, access to information, health or financial services, or general socio-economic empowerment. Women and girls still make up the bulk of the illiterate population across the world, and they are more likely to suffer deep marginalization in conservative societies that limit their mobility and expression.

Examining gender roles may lead to a greater understanding of the differences between women and men in terms of ICT use and its impact. A few examples of the questions raised along gender lines are provided here:

- In a given community, who makes household decisions and where do they get the information upon which those decisions are based?
- In a given community, do women and men, girls and boys participate equally in the use of Internet facilities at a library or telecenter?
- At public ICT centers, are men visiting inappropriate or violent sites and making women uncomfortable within that environment?
- In a development organization, is there a gender difference among those who use email and those who do not? Is a general public email account assigned to a lower category of staff

members, who are usually women, compared with private email accounts of top management, who are usually men?

In addition to the digital divide between developed and developing regions, an ongoing gender divide persists, where women and girls have less access to ICTs than do men and boys. There are many reasons for this, ranging from outright gender discrimination to limitations in physical location or the reality that women often have less free time or disposable income. Women and girls from marginalized communities tend to be especially less engaged. Biases still exist within many social and cultural norms globally. Technology is sometimes considered to be interesting only to boys and men. Or, women are inaccurately thought to be uninterested or unable to learn how to use computer technologies. More often, a low level of literacy and overall education is a key barrier, while lack of freedom and control can also constrain access.

If women remain excluded from ICT knowledge and services, they will become increasingly marginalized, the gender gap will grow, and many of the secondary benefits to be gained from women's empowerment and gender equality will fail to materialize.

Community ICT centers can counter this prevailing negative trend. If planned and executed properly, community ICT centers can be an effective vehicle to help women acquire literacy skills, numeracy skills, and resources to help them to start and build their own businesses, secure their livelihoods and become socially and politically active.

2 How Can Community ICT Centers Reach Women?

The development of ICTs, and the benefits that may accrue to women from using them, depend on the ability of countries and regions to support effective, pro-active and deliberate policies that push for the social inclusion of women in all spheres of economic and social activity and decision-making.

At the same time, the success of a community ICT center requires more than telecommunication infrastructure, it requires targeted support programmes by governments, the private sector and NGOs to train users, operators and service providers.¹ To fully realize their potential, community ICT centers need a policy environment that supports systems and appropriate policies for sustainability. For example, policies should ensure gender equity in the implementation process, promote pricing policies that favor community center services, and develop investment incentives for universal access. If policy-makers want to prioritize universal access, they need to focus on the demands of their rural and suburban populations.

A *public goods approach* is vital for women and women's groups to access ICTs, to leverage the propensities of the evolving information and communication ecology for furthering their struggles, whether they revolve around the right to information, the right to livelihoods, the need for educational content in local languages, current community radio initiatives or accessing local services. Public financing instruments and institutional arrangements that tackle these needs head-on are critical to realizing the capability rights of women through ICT access.

¹ "(...) most universal access programmes that focus on providing Internet access in rural areas concentrate exclusively on the roll-out of infrastructure. Studies show, however, that the most successful community Internet center programmes are those that are linked from their inception to a wide variety of capacity-building and support programmes that are implemented jointly between government entities, local communities, businesses and NGOs. Successful universal access programmes depend not only on the availability and affordability of infrastructure, but also on the availability and quality of suitable content and applications, as well as the level of training of its users, operators, and service providers", ITU *Trends in Telecommunication Reform 2007 The road to next-generation networks (NGN)*, Geneva, International Telecommunication Union, 2007.

2.1 Guiding Principles for Gender-Inclusive Design

Two fundamental principles should guide the development of any community ICT center, in order to integrate the needs of women and girls: (1) participatory community involvement and (2) partnership development.

Principle I: Participatory community involvement

From the outset, actively engaging women and girls throughout the process of designing and establishing a community ICT center will ensure that its services, location and management reflect and respond to the needs of this constituency of users. Participatory involvement must provide a realistic and deliberate opportunity for women and girls to have their ideas considered equally for the design, implementation and operation of the center. This will promote a sense of “ownership” or “belonging.” Participatory methods may include individual or group interviews, focus groups, needs surveys, community outreach events, or broadcast communications (radio, posters, etc.). Ongoing dialogue with the community is essential to tailor the community ICT center to the needs of the community it serves.

Key community stakeholders should also be engaged to maximize community involvement. This should include teachers, school principals, faith leaders, business leaders, local government representatives and other local champions. The higher the level of engagement, the stronger the community ownership of the center will be. Additional stakeholders may include NGOs, farmers’ groups and industry.

Staff, trainers and administrators should come from the community. Being led by those who understand the community and the context (e.g. the community’s history, present needs, main activities, cultural context, etc.) will improve impact and inclusion

Principle II: Partnership development and building community linkages

The “public face” of the community ICT center should be friendly to girls and women. The community ICT center should develop and maintain working relations with those agencies that work with and for women, and should provide a service to these agencies. The center’s administrators should be acquainted with how other institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, health clinics) and organizations serve the community, in order to determine how the ICT center can work in concert with them.

Building strong community linkages will increase the inclusiveness and outreach of the center. For example, if training is provided on basic computer skills and how to find a job, the center could then link with local employment organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) or the chamber of commerce.

2.2 Women-Specific Design Elements of the Community Center

A basic design framework that addresses women’s socio-cultural contexts and information needs might include several important design elements.

- **Data and Record-Keeping** - Community ICT centers should maintain a high-standard, itemized record of usage of services by type, and by type of user, including age and gender. This data is critical for identifying gaps in usage, for improving service and outreach to unmet constituencies,

and for budget forecasts and planning. Despite a broad recognition of a gender digital divide, there is still a significant lack of data or gender-disaggregated statistics on ICTs. This makes providing factual evidence difficult. In 2005, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women recommended compiling gender-disaggregated data on the use of ICTs and women's participation in policy-making, as well as developing targets, indicators and benchmarks to track real progress in access and benefits.² Monitoring and evaluation procedures and processes that take gender differentials into account will provide baseline data and comparators on women's ICT use.

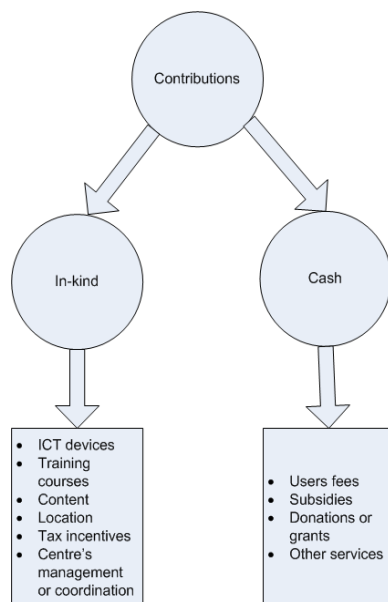
- Community responsiveness - The center's services and programmes need to be directly responsive to societal development priorities and needs. These may include offering literacy and related learning programs, expanding digital capabilities (including communication and accessing information), improving equal rights for minorities and the disadvantaged, or providing distance working, lifelong learning and citizenship and administrative services in the community. In some contexts, ICT training programs may need to consider providing all-female sessions. This can be further enhanced by engaging women as teachers, mentors and role models.
- Developing content and training materials - Women's information needs are closely related to their economic and social circumstances (e.g. whether they live in a rural or urban area, their literacy level, whether they are self-employed or work as an employee, etc). Consequently, for content to be relevant, women and girls' local needs must be assessed on the basis of their social, educational and economic contexts, as well as on the opportunities available to them for development and empowerment through ICTs. The Internet is growing as a provider of information on health issues, women's rights, and on economic and employment opportunities, such as the availability of training and financial services.
- Physical accessibility - Location is an important consideration in designing a community ICT center that integrates various gender needs, and the social context must be measured carefully. Certain cultural beliefs may limit or prevent access to centers, and issues such as personal safety and privacy must also be considered. A community ICT center can be a standalone physical space or it can be integrated into other spaces that women and girls might frequent, such as schools, temples, mosques, pagodas or churches, health clinics, post offices, market centers and government offices.
- Privacy and security - Women may require extra privacy to feel comfortable using ICTs. In a conservative society, this might mean a women-only space. Women and girls should be able to have their own email accounts and be able to freely access information without surveillance. They also should have access to secure online spaces free of harassment and exploitation. Women need to be made aware of the "etiquette" of using the Internet, as well as the potential risks from "scammers," software viruses and other related downsides of Internet use. They will need basic but effective protection from cyber-crime.

² United Nations. (2005). *Women 2000 and beyond: Gender equality and empowerment of women through ICT*. (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf>)

2.3 Governance and Financial Viability Concerns

This section explores ways to ensure that gender sensitivity is built into the management and support structures of the community ICT access center.

- **Gender-Sensitive Governance** - The entire governance structure of community centers should reflect gender-sensitivity – including in the composition of their boards of directors and the selection of senior executives and project managers. Job descriptions or terms of reference need to specify the importance of understanding and articulating development issues and ICT impacts from a gender perspective. Gender advisors to both board and staff should become part of general governance policy.



- **Financing** - Several factors, such as low population density, low income and high operating costs, have been identified as challenges in sustaining community ICT programmes. The most commonly underestimated community ICT center costs are related to staff training, security (physical and data security), and the costs of updating and maintaining equipment. The forward-looking community ICT center needs to consider how best to balance its capital costs and its revenue potential, while ensuring affordability for its users. Financing a community ICT center can be achieved through in-kind contributions and/or funds and revenue. Revenue and financing may be a composite of subsidies, donations/grants and fees for services.

- **User fees** - Whether or not user fees should be collected will depend on several factors, and the question should be decided on a case-by-case basis. A minimal fee to attend a training course often motivates people to attend and benefit from the course more than when it is free. However, in certain circumstances even a minimal fee can be unaffordable for poor women and girls, acting as a disincentive to attendance.

3 Using ICTs to Promote Literacy and Learning

There are at least two main dimensions to ICTs and literacy. One dimension revolves around the teaching of such basic skills as reading, writing and counting to the “illiterate.” ICTs can be applied to produce interactive and audio-visual curriculum materials for use in classrooms and to assist in classroom teaching and distance learning.

The second dimension involves functional digital literacy as an ingredient of socio-economic development. Here, technology is put into the hands of learners to use and adapt, and to formulate applications that are meaningful in the context of their daily lives.

Learning the fundamentals of keyboard and browser use can open the door to an infinite range of learning experiences. Deliberate and dedicated programmes that cater to first-time adult users, especially women, need to be designed, supported and delivered to enable this constituency of users to step over the digital threshold. Often, the simple functions of receiving and sending emails, using a search engine and reading

Web content are the starter blocks to training in ICT use. Demonstrating the usefulness of being ICT-literate in the context of their lives will create an incentive for women to participate actively and to use their newly acquired skills.

In preparing an ICT course, it is important to:

- Learn about women's specific needs within the community. If there are several women's groups with different needs, courses should reflect this. When planning training, engage with women in the community to get their views and conduct a needs survey;
- Include exercises so that each woman or girl can practice them in the telecenter or computer center, in their own time;
- Choose context-relevant examples and exercises that apply to the realities that the women are dealing with on a daily basis; and
- Collaborate jointly with women's institutions and organizations and other mainstream training institutions.

In many cultures, education in science and technology is often perceived to be a male domain. Training in ICT skills is rarely gender-sensitive or tailored to women's needs, and may be delivered by a male trainer who has embedded perceptions about women's capabilities that are inconsistent with a research-based understanding of women's competencies and contributions in these fields.³ Training and supporting a network of women trainers is one way to redress these preconceptions.

Being ICT-literate can generate a positive impact for women in many spheres, including:

- Education and life-long learning - ICTs serve as teaching aids and tools for developing skills. Women can access basic and advanced education courses and life-long learning, as well as different training courses via the Internet. Women can access books, articles and general information in e-libraries and on the Web, and they are able to get in touch with others to perform joint projects, regardless of physical location.
- Information services - Women can access information that is important to nearly every activity they do, ranging from health care to small business management. If they need information concerning how to price their products, for example, they can learn how to obtain it from reliable sources. This can contribute to longer and healthier lives for women and their families.
- Communication and networking - In many countries, women entrepreneurs are often social entrepreneurs first and foremost. The majority of small-scale women entrepreneurs often bear several community responsibilities beyond the immediate household. These women need to build on existing modes of networking to extend their reach out to business intermediary agencies and wider markets. When women are ICT-literate, they can participate in online social networks, keep in touch with family members and friends, and organize and advocate for their rights through civil society movements.
- Indigenous knowledge, values and culture - Women can transmit their own cultural values and traditions through ICTs, preserving their cultural heritage. They can produce Web content in their own languages and post it online. Migrant women can stay in touch and establish links with their home communities. ICTs have also played an important role in preserving and identifying

³ Information and communication technologies for women's socio-economic empowerment. World Bank Group Working Paper Series, June 2009

threatened or marginalized cultural artefacts and traditions. Communities have a wealth of indigenous knowledge that remains “untapped” and unshared, but which can now be recorded and handed down to future generations.⁴

- Access to job opportunities - ICTs open a wide range of opportunities for increasing women’s income. Women with ICT skills will have more opportunities to find interesting and well-paid employment. Also, ICTs can be used to buy and sell products. Additionally, women can work from home using ICTs, which can reduce time constraints in women’s daily agendas.
- Political participation - ICTs provide women with information on government activities, political parties and candidates for public office. When women can freely access information about their communities and governments, they can more easily participate fully in the political process.
- Human rights - Women and men with basic ICT skills can more readily (and if they wish, anonymously) report on human rights violations. With the use of ICTs, the international community has become more aware of the abuse of women’s basic human rights.

Computer-assisted learning can offer the digital learner many advantages, including the use of computer games and interactive activities that make learning easy and attractive. Digital content developed in local languages can be downloaded and accessed by learners at a time that suits them best. Similarly, by presenting reading lessons and numeracy education in a game form, computer programs encourage learners to compete against themselves and engage in repetition and practice without losing interest. Such computer programs repeat words and correct errors for large numbers of students at the same time, thereby reducing pressure on overworked teachers.

There is a huge potential for ICT applications to promote literacy and numeracy around the world. In particular, ICTs can be enlisted to overcome the many obstacles outlined above by fitting into people’s lives flexibly.

4 Supporting Women’s Entrepreneurial and Professional Activities

ICTs have been shown to be deeply interconnected with improving social, economic and political engagement and development. ICTs can empower women and girls by increasing their *direct* access to information, education and services. Communication technologies also increase opportunities to connect and find a stronger voice – not only in the local community, but potentially to influence the world. ICTs help to ensure that the ideas and perspectives of both women and girls are heard and taken into account by decision-makers. This includes access at school, which is why a number of projects focus on girls’ access to computers and the Internet, teaching girls the skills they need to use technology in the wider world.

Ways in which ICTs can contribute to women’s economic empowerment include:

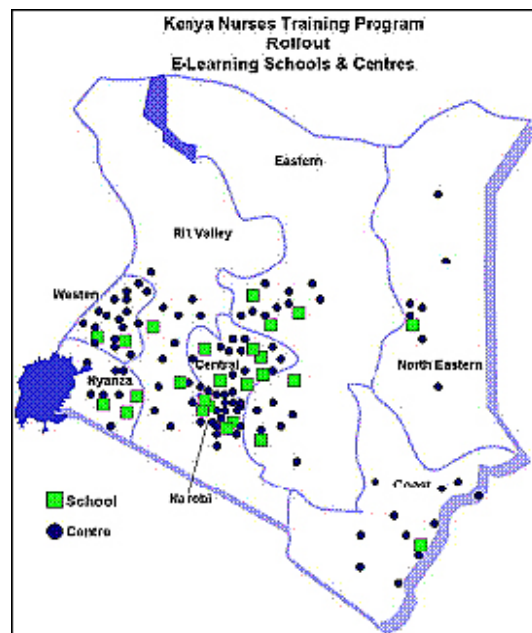
- An increased ability for women to work from home;
- Improved employment opportunities for women in the IT sector;

⁴ Local Voices Enhance Knowledge Uptake: Sharing Local Content in Local Voices David Grimshaw and Lawrence Gudza 2010 The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries <http://www.ejisdc.org/ojs2/index.php/ejisdc/article/viewFile/649/312>

- Increased ability of informal-sector women to find formal employment;
- Improved global market access for craftswomen through e-commerce;
- Transformation of traditional gender roles;
- Improved access of women, especially rural women, to distance learning and distance work programs;
- Improved ability for sharing of experiences among women's organizations concerned with the economic well-being of women in the informal sector; and
- Increased ability to avoid gender bias by having a gender-opaque medium.

ICTs have multiple roles in training, capacity-building, learning by doing and community-building, all of which can be provided through community ICT centers. A variety of tools provide an effective and efficient means to deliver informal training courses, more sophisticated qualification-driven learning, learning by communicating with others, or from reaching out to see what others are doing.

One interesting example of formal e-training is the ongoing effort to upgrade qualifications provided by the African Medical Research Foundation's (AMREF's) virtual nursing school, which serves thousands of nurses across Kenya. This is a public-private partnership with the Nursing Council of Kenya (NCK), AMREF, Accenture, the Kenya Medical Training Colleges, several private and faith-based nursing schools and the Ministry of Health, all collaborating in delivering a country-wide eLearning programme for nurses. The programme commenced in September 2005 with four schools and 145 students aiming to upgrade 22,000 Enrolled Community Health Nurses (KECHN) from "enrolled" to "registered" level within five years.



4.1 ICTs and E-financing

The financial sector is extending its reach to poorer and under-served sections of the market for banking and other services. ICTs are already being applied to serve small businesses in many ways, such as:

- Adapting and simplifying book-keeping, accounting and loan-tracking software;
- Computerizing financial reporting and performance measures, making them cost-effective, secure and accessible to both borrowers and lenders;
- Providing individual borrowers with secure, user-friendly account access through location points in local banks, post offices, and other community centers; and
- Building up savings and credit schemes through mobile banking, smart cards, handhelds, and modified ATMs, in order to bypass the traditional methods of providing bank services. As banking services become a built-in function of mobile wireless telephony, these aspects of recording and completing transactions will expand.

Where women workers are unable to visit banks to deposit their pay, mobile banking allows them either to make loan payments or add to their savings. Likewise, women may not have access to information about government benefits to which they are entitled. Where governments make such information available on the Internet, the same ICT devices that enable women to manage their credit and savings can also be used to access their benefits.

4.2 E-commerce, Markets and Small Enterprise Development

ICTs are being adapted and used to build women's economic capacities. Women are being trained to use the Internet to buy and sell local products, to access current information on raw material prices, to use microfinance services, and to use software for financial and business management.

Trade and development in the context of globalization is as much female-led as it is export-led.

Increasingly, policy-makers and business leaders alike are acknowledging the profit value of women's involvement in small business. Business leaders cannot afford to ignore this critical section of the productive labor force. Many large corporations are increasingly producing, sourcing or distributing from developing nations, and this often involves working with local partners and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as part of their value chains.⁵

ICTs have also become effective tools for networking among women and women's groups, allowing them to pool resources, information and numbers together to form cooperatives -- or simply to voice their desire for change. The importance of networking cannot be underestimated, as women often look to the broader women's movement beyond their national boundaries for solidarity and policy shifts.

⁵ The **World Business Council on Sustainable Development** www.wbcsd.org offers several examples of large corporations partnering with small enterprises – including Pentland and Nike in Vietnam, SC Johnson and pyrethrum growing in Kenya, and Delta Corporation (food & leisure) outsourcing to SMEs in Zimbabwe.

5 Guidelines for Ministries, Regulators and Private Sector

This section provides a series of checklists that are aimed at ensuring that both men and women have equitable chances to use and benefit from ICTs and to participate in community ICT centers.

5.1 Gender Analysis and Assessment in the Center's Development

Needs Identification and Design

- What are the special needs of men and women for ICTs related to the project? Have both men's and women's needs been considered in defining project objectives? Have both men and women participated in setting these objectives and expectations?
- What is the gendered division of labor in the target population of the project? Are there ways in which the ICTs employed in the project would increase men's and women's productivity and learning, or their access to, and control of, resources?
- What are the constraints that might block men or women from equitable participation in the center? Are there barriers and constraints that might affect men's or women's access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making?
- Has the impact of the project on gender divisions in the target population been considered? Are there any ways in which it might adversely affect women's situations? If any negative impacts are foreseen, can the project be adjusted to overcome them?

Project Preparation

- Have women representatives, gender-aware organizations and community members been consulted in the project planning process?
- Are the project design team and implementation staff, especially those concerned with ICT delivery, gender-aware? If not, might they benefit from gender-awareness training?
- Have efforts been made to recruit gender-balanced staff and consultants?
- Is there a gender expert on the project team?

Project Implementation

- Does the project include measures to equalize opportunities and access for both men and women?
- If it is likely that women would be under-represented in project activities, are there specific actions that target women?
- Are the institutions that will deliver services under the project gender-aware?
- Do men and women have equitable access to project ICT resources, including credit, training and facilities?
- Can partnerships be built to enhance outreach and improve access to ensure gender equality?
- Are regular consultations held with all key stakeholders?

Project Monitoring and Evaluation

- What measures are in place to capture user feedback from men and women?
- Will project-monitoring data be disaggregated by gender?
- Have indicators been identified that can be measured with gender-disaggregated data?
- Is gender analysis included in the terms of reference of the evaluation team?

- Is the evaluation team gender-balanced?
- Will gender-disaggregated data and indicators be collected and analyzed?

Measuring Outcomes

- Are any gender-positive outcomes anticipated? Among the possible gender-positive outcomes that might result from ICT projects are the following:
 - ✓ Improving opportunities for men and women to access, use and benefit from ICTs
 - ✓ Fostering shared control over decision-making and resources related to ICTs
 - ✓ Improvement in women's income from the use of ICTs in the project
 - ✓ More women using ICTs (more) as a result of the project
 - ✓ Increased access to relevant information for women and men.

5.2 Guidelines for Regulators

Sector Liberalization

- Is sector liberalization being promoted in order to bring in investment and reduce end-user prices, thus making telecommunications and ICT more accessible to men and women?
- Is consideration given to reducing high customs duties on mobile telephones and computer equipment that deter women users, who are likely to have less disposable income than men?
- Is the national regulator directing private sector players to deliver on social and gender policy objectives such as universal access?
- In return for granting licenses, is the regulator compelling service providers to provide service to underserved areas where women predominate?
- Is the regulator providing funds for research, development and testing of technology that will serve women?
- Are gender-equity concerns a part of community service obligations performed by cellular phone operators?

Regulatory Frameworks

- Do regulators permit the resale of mobile phone services, which may be profitable businesses for women to establish?
- Has the regulatory framework addressed reducing licensing fees, spectrum prices, and interconnection charges that might make ICTs more accessible to women?

Licensing

- Has consideration been given to reducing fees for telecommunications, Internet service provider (ISP), and mobile service licenses to promote improved affordability by women and the poor?

- Has consideration been given to allocating special licenses for rural operators or community ICT center operators -- especially those run by and for women?
- Do license awards contain conditions that promote gender analysis and mainstreaming within the licensed company?

Universal Access

- Do universal access policies stress public access points as an alternative to more capital-intensive choices (one line per home) and ensure that locations of public access points are gender-sensitive (e.g., not just in bars or auto shops but also in schools, clinics and markets)?
- Whenever access to ICTs is considered, do women have such access? If not, what actions can be taken so that they will have access?

Universal Service Obligations

- If regulators call for establishment of telecenters in under-served areas, as part of license-holder universal service obligations, have the different needs of men and women in the concerned communities been considered?
- Does proposed service delivery to under-served areas reflect geographical gender distribution in the population?
- Are disadvantaged and/or rural women, such as single mothers, widows, or disabled women, given any priority for service, subsidies or special pricing?

5.3 Checklist for Content Providers and Trainers

Courses and Training in ICT Skills

- Are there women facilitators or trainers?
- Are training materials accessible to illiterate populations and local dialect speakers?
- Where illiterate populations seek to develop ICT skills, is their illiteracy also addressed, e.g. through online training?
- Is any additional support or provision for women necessary? e.g. child-care?
- Are training activities and access times and locations compatible with women's daily schedules and possible travel limitations?

ICT and Education Projects

- Have efforts been made to ensure equitable access to ICTs for women and girls in schools and other educational facilities?
- Are girls' and women's responsibilities for domestic chores taken into account in scheduling access and training?
- Are there cultural or social issues that call for single-sex instruction in ICTs?

Systems for Learning and Training

- Do women have equal access to technical training?

- Have efforts been made to ensure that women are among those trained when introducing computer hardware and information systems?
- Are necessary adjustments made to facilitate women's and girls' participation in view of multiple roles and cultural constraints?
- Are there mechanisms for women to enter these fields and training programs or to develop as role models for young girls?
- Are training opportunities available not only for technology professionals but for non-professionals to use ICTs?
- Have attempts been made to find and select women participants?

Distance Learning Projects

- Is data on students/users disaggregated by sex (to show possible gender differentials in users)?
- Are the information and learning needs of both men and women considered in designing programs?
- Is the content of programs relevant to both men and women?
- Are there constraints to women participating in the courses (e.g. are courses for civil servants delivered at times that are convenient to women workers)?
- Does the distance learning incorporate flexibility in scheduling and location to accommodate both men and women?
- Are there differences in subjects and technical skill levels by gender, requiring remediation or accommodation?
- Are there differences in foreign language abilities by gender among the targeted recipients? For example, if courses are in English, are women less likely to have a mastery of that language?
- Does the course content recognize gender issues in the substantive material for the course (e.g. in public administration)?

ICT Content Development Projects

- Is the information/content distributed in ways that make it easily accessible to women and men at varying levels of literacy, education and economic status?
- Is information made readily available to all users, regardless of class, race or gender?
- Are opportunities provided for women to discuss the information received and ways to deal with the socioeconomic barriers they face?
- What measures have been taken to protect women's traditional knowledge, particularly about crops and plants, so that it can be preserved, used without exploitation, and patented, if appropriate?

Information Systems Development

- Do women have equitable access to the information in the system?
- Is the information relevant to their information needs?
- Is there equitable access for men and women to the training needed to use the system?
- Have attempts been made, where relevant, to incorporate women's indigenous knowledge?

6 International, Regional and Gender-Specific Policy Frameworks

The 2005 World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) recognized the importance of greater female inclusion. There is a strong link between women, ICTs and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ICTs can, for example, facilitate achievement of MDG 3, to promote gender equality and empower women. Working to increase women's access to ICTs is central to the achievement of a number of international treaties and targets. While this list is not exhaustive, it touches on some of the most important frameworks.

6.1 International Policy Frameworks

- ❖ *The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* - CEDAW defines discrimination against women as: "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women...of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil or any other field." ICTs are an essential element in enabling women to access their human rights and entitlements in those spheres, and so ICTs are essential to the practical implementation of CEDAW. See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw>
- ❖ *The Millennium Development Goals* - The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an agreed set of key objectives to address the world's main development challenges; they were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000. There are eight MDGs, broken down into 21 quantifiable targets, which are measurable by 60 indicators. The UN recommends that all indicators should be disaggregated by gender. But in fact, ITU as well as the other UN agencies in charge of MDG indicators face great difficulty in collecting reliable gender-disaggregated data, especially in developing countries. Besides gender mainstreaming for all MDGs, the MDG 3 is specific to women's empowerment. See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>
- ❖ *World Summit on the Information Society Targets* - The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is an initiative of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). Its objective is to "build the framework of an all-inclusive and equitable Information Society," and to find ways to use ICT to advance development goals, such as those contained in the Millennium Declaration. See <http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html>
- ❖ *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers* - Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are blueprints for reducing poverty in developing countries, drawn up by the national governments in collaboration with civil society and with input from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They place a great emphasis on social indicators and on building the capacity of state actors to regulate the economy. In the 29 PRSPs analyzed in 2003, 12 countries (Albania, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chad, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda and Sri Lanka) define or categorize ICTs as a strategic component for poverty reduction, and discuss it as an independent item in their PRSPs. See <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/facts/prsp.htm>

6.2 Regional Policy Frameworks

- *Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat* - The CARICOM ICT strategy is an instrument for strengthened connectivity and development to foster greater prosperity and social transformation between and among member states, as well as the rest of the world. In CARICOM, there is a continuing focus on mainstreaming ICT activities and development to effectively contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly

those related to poverty reduction, education, and health, environment and gender equity. See http://www.caricom.org/jsp/projects/projects_ict.jsp?menu=projects

- *Association of South East Asian Nations* - The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is governed by the 2000 e-ASEAN Framework and by the annual meeting of the telecommunications ministers, known as TELMIN. ASEAN has made a number of declarations and plans of action with respect to ICTs. Related to telecenters for women is the Siem Reap Declaration on Enhancing Universal Access of ICT Services in ASEAN (2007), which commits to enhancing access to ICT services so that the rural communities and remote areas in the ASEAN region will have equal access and connectivity at affordable rates. See <http://www.aseansec.org/6267.htm>
- *New Partnership for African Development* - The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) e-Africa Commission is the ICT arm of NEPAD. It works for long-term solutions for the development of the ICT sector in Africa. The NEPAD e-Africa Commission creates partnerships and collaborates with governments, companies and local people to realize positive change in the ICT sector. See <http://www.eafricacommission.org/>
- *African Union* - The African Regional Action Plan on the Knowledge Economy seeks to build a region fully benefiting from ICT services by the year 2015. It commits the African Union and countries of the region to adopt gender-sensitive approaches to enable women to better access ICTs. See <http://www.commit4africa.org/declaration/african-regional-action-plan-knowledge-economy-arapke-framework-action>
<http://www.uneca.org/aisi/docs/ARAPKE%20version%20of%20September%202005.pdf>
- *Organization of American States and the Santo Domingo Declaration* - The Santo Domingo Declaration is a commitment from the 34 foreign affairs ministries of the Organization of American States to take all measures needed to develop ICT in their countries. The declaration recognises the importance of the gender perspective and the need to enhance women's equitable access to the benefits of ICTs. It also aims to ensure that ICTs become a central tool for the empowerment of women and promotion of gender equality. Policies, programs, and projects need to address gender inequalities in access to and the use of ICTs. See <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/materiales/docs/997/DECSANTODOMe04.pdf>

7 Conclusion

ICTs are no longer an optional “extra” provided to complement other services. The Internet, mobile phones and social networking sites are becoming as commonplace as television, newspapers and radio. Consequently, not having access to these technologies is a form of illiteracy itself. Virtually all international agencies and governments recognize this. Millennium Development Goal 8 contains specific targets with respect to ICTs, and the next round of targets developed after 2015 will undoubtedly place even greater emphasis on the centrality of communications technologies and computing to international development.

At the same time, increasing numbers of governments and international organizations are also recognizing the importance of empowering women and girls. Women’s empowerment is, and should continue to be, pursued primarily as a rights-based objective. Women and girls make up half of humanity and all political

and economic strategies must give explicit recognition to this fact. There is also increasing recognition of the overall importance of women's empowerment to social and economic development.

Programmes aiming to use ICTs as tools to empower women are therefore directly related to two of the foremost development challenges of the early twenty-first century: expanding ICT access and empowering women. Both objectives also relate to a host of other developmental goals. Empirical research from all corners of the globe proves that empowering women helps reduce poverty, child morbidity and mortality, and increases children's enrolment in schools. As the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, puts it: "Investing in women is not just the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do."⁶

⁶ Secretary General speaking on women's day, March 8th 2008, at UN Headquarters, New York.
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/obv684.doc.htm>