

Gender ICT and Millennium Development Goals

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and information and communication technology are important in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in policy, planning, and practice. The 2000 Millennium Declaration of the United Nations (UN) formed an international agreement among member states to work toward the reduction of poverty and its effects by 2015 through eight Millennium Development Goals:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and the empowerment of women
4. Reduce child and maternal mortality
5. Improve maternal health care
6. Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop global partnership for development

Progress toward gender equality and the empowerment of women is one goal that is important to achieving the others. Poverty, hunger, illiteracy, environmental threats, HIV and AIDS, and other health threats disproportionately affect the lives of women and their dependent children. Gender-sensitive ICT applications to education, health care, and local economies have helped communities progress toward the MDGs. ICT applications facilitate rural health-care workers' access to medical expertise through phones and the Internet. Teachers expand learning resources through the Internet and satellite services, providing a greater knowledge base for learners. Small entrepreneurs with ICT access and training move their local business into world markets.

ICT diffusion into world communication systems has been pervasive. Even some of the poorest economies in Africa show the fastest cell-phone growth, though Internet access and landline num-

bers are still low (International Telecommunications Union [ITU], 2003b). ICT access or a lack of it impacts participation, voice, and decision making in local, regional, and international communities.

ICTs impact the systems that move or inhibit MDG progress. UN secretary general Kofi Annan explained the role of the MDGs in global affairs:

Millennium Development Goals are too important to fail. For the international political system, they are the fulcrum on which development policy is based. For the billion-plus people living in extreme poverty, they represent the means to a productive life. For everyone on Earth, they are a linchpin to the quest for a more secure and peaceful world. (UN, 2005, p. 28)

Annan also stressed the critical need for partnerships to facilitate technology training to enable information exchange and analysis (UN, 2005). ICT facilitates sharing lessons of success and failure, and progress evaluation of work in all the MDG target areas.

Targets and indicators measuring progress were selected for all the MDGs. Gender equality and women's empowerment are critical to the achievement of each other goal. Inadequate access to the basic human needs of clean water, food, education, health services, and environmental sustainability and the support of global partnership impacts great numbers of women. Therefore, the targets and indicators for Goal 3 address females in education, employment, and political participation. Progress toward the Goal 3 target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015, will be measured by the following indicators.

- Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education
- Ratio of literate females to males who are 15- to 24-year-olds

- Share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector
- Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (World Bank, 2003)

Education is positively related to improved maternal and infant health, economic empowerment, and political participation (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2004; World Bank, 2003). Education systems in developing countries are beginning to offer or seek ways to provide ICT training as a basic skill and knowledge base.

Proactive policy for gender equality in ICT access has not always accompanied the unprecedented ICT growth trend. Many civil-society representatives to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) argue for ICT access to be considered a basic human right (Girard & Ó Soichrú, 2004; UN, 1948).

ICT capability is considered a basic skill for education curriculum at tertiary, secondary, and even primary levels in developed regions. In developing regions, ICT access and capability are more limited but are still tightly woven into economic communication systems. ICTs minimize time and geography barriers.

Two thirds of the world's poor and illiterate are women (World Bank, 2003). Infant and maternal health are in chronic crisis for poor women. Where poverty is highest, HIV and AIDS are the largest and fastest growing health threat. Ninety-five percent of people living with HIV and AIDS are in developing countries, partly because of poor dissemination of information and medical treatment. Women are more vulnerable to infection than men. Culturally reinforced sexual practices have led to higher rates of HIV infection for women. Gender equality and the empowerment of women, starting with education, can help fight the spread of HIV, AIDS, and other major diseases. ICT can enhance health education through schools (World Bank).

Some ICT developers, practitioners, and distributors have identified ways to incorporate gender inclusiveness into their policies and practice for problem-solving ICT applications toward each MDG target area. Yet ICT research, development, education, training, applications, and businesses remain male-dominated fields, with only the lesser skilled and salaried ICT labor force approaching gender

equality. Successful integration of gender equality and ICT development policy has contributed to MDG progress through several projects in the developing regions. Notable examples are the South-African-based SchoolNet Africa and Bangladesh-based Grameen Bank Village Pay Phone. Both projects benefit from international public-private partnerships. These and similar models suggest the value and importance of linking gender equality and empowerment with global partnership for development, particularly in ICT.

This article reports on developing efforts to coordinate the achievement of the MDGs with policy, plans, and practice for gender equality beyond the universal educational target, and with the expansion of ICT access and participation for women and men. The article examines the background and trends of MDG 3, to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, with particular consideration of MDG 8, to develop global partnership for development, in ICT access and participation.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations convened the Millennium Summit in September 2000, which produced the Millennium Declaration and eight Millennium Development Goals to eliminate poverty and its effects. Targets were defined for each goal to be achieved by 2015. The evaluation of national progress on each goal has been ongoing since 2000. The UNDP and the Millennium Campaign are affirming national accountability through monitoring progress on the measurable indicators for each target. The UN struggle to uphold human rights to equality and freedom from want began with its founding mission and the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR; UN, 1948).

All UN member nations committed to the MDGs and targets developed through the summit. Each nation regularly reports its progress and is accountable for national achievement toward the goals.

The goal of gender equality has been advanced internationally through treaties and agreements. Arguments for gender equality in ICT policy and development were supported by the precedent agreements of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948), the Convention on the Elimina-

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