



Information and Communication Technology: An Opportunity to Empower Women and Close the Gender Divide

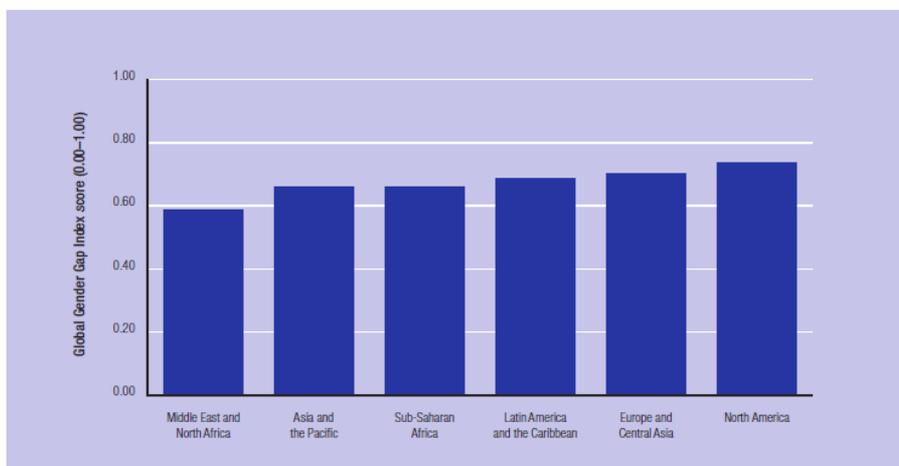
Centre for Women (ECW)
UN- ESCWA

A bi-annual ECW issuance aiming at raising the gender awareness and responsiveness through highlighting the gender dimensions in various fields.

The significance of women's role in the development process has been acknowledged by theorists and practitioners alike. After decades of failed gender-blind strategies, policymakers and development specialists have begun to underscore the need to ensure the active participation of women in all socioeconomic sectors as a prerequisite to achieving competitive conditions in any society. In this context, Arab countries have made significant investments to improve the conditions of women's lives, increase their political and economic contribution and, in the process, decrease the prominent gender gap. Nevertheless, Arab women continue to suffer from inequality and limited access to resources, not only in the areas of health care, education and employment, but especially in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

In recent decades, ICT has changed the structure of the global economy quantitatively and qualitatively.¹ Integrating ICT into societies and economies entails numerous changes, including new ways of being and doing. To benefit from those new ways, it is essential to empower women and increase their inclusion. This newsletter explores the role of ICT in closing the global gender gap and in fostering the meaningful integration of women into development initiatives at all levels.

Figure 1. Regional performance on the Global Gender Gap Index 2012



Source: Global Gender Gap Index 2012.

Note: Scores are weighted by population, population data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) online database 2011, accessed July 2012.



"Equality for women and girls is not only a basic human right; it is a social and economic imperative. Where women are educated and empowered, economies are more productive and strong. Where women are fully represented, societies are more peaceful and stable".

United Nations
Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon, 2 July
2010

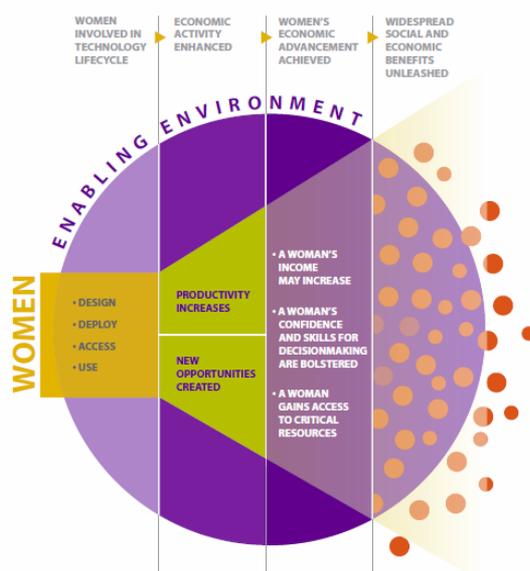
Highlights:

- **Information and Communication Technology: An Opportunity to Empower Women and Close the Gender Divide**
- **ECW at Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, 2012**
- **Girls in ICT Portal: International Telecommunication Union Portal**

“Women and ICT” has been on the international agenda since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. During that conference, increasing the access of women to new technologies to express their opinions was identified as a strategic objective

The World Economic Forum, in its “Global Gender Gap Report 2012”, quantified the magnitude of gender-based disparities in various regions of the world.² It tracked progress over time by providing a comprehensive framework for benchmarking existing gaps. Unfortunately, available figures indicate that the Middle East and North Africa suffers from the widest gender gap of all regions of the world (figure 1). However, the last few decades have witnessed a growing understanding of how ICT may provide effective instruments to foster

Figure 2. How technology can facilitate the economic advancement of women



equitable social and economic development for all, especially women. There are numerous possibilities, namely: the creation of new employment opportunities; enhancement of service delivery; increase of access to educational opportunities; and better engagement between governments and people.³ Therefore, embarking on the wave of ICT has become a must in today's Information Society, and many governments have indeed invested significant efforts in that direction. It should be noted, however, that the pace of this wave and its effects vary significantly across and within countries, including in the Arab region.

In 2010, the International Centre for Research on Women published a study entitled *Bridging the Gender Divide: How Technology Can Advance Women Economically*. It provided a conceptual framework reflecting the major pathways for technology along with a theoretical

grounding related to gender equality (figure 2).⁴ Such pathways are centered on increasing the ability of women to participate in productive economic activities and ultimately enhance their empowerment while providing them with equal social and economic benefits. Furthermore, the findings of the study confirmed that technology can be a means for empowerment only if the barriers that traditionally contributed to the gender divide have been overcome. Those barriers include lack of access to basic educational and training tools, stereotypical images of gender roles, and the concentration of girls in the humanities and social studies at the expense of their entry into technical and technological fields.⁵

Overcoming gender inequality is one of the main priorities of the United Nations. Specialized United Nations agencies have played a crucial role in harnessing ICT as a tool for social and economic development. As such, the issue of women and ICT has been on the international agenda since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. During that conference, increasing women's access to new technologies to express and pursue their interests was identified as a strategic objective.⁶ In addition, the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) declared a global commitment to ensuring the empowerment of women and their full participation in the field of information technology and called on the global community to build women's capacity in the use of ICTs. The WSIS Declaration of Principles specifically states that "literacy and universal primary education are key factors for building a fully inclusive information society, paying particular attention to the special needs of girls and women."⁷ Accordingly, national governments, the private sector, the donor community, civil society and education specialists should acknowledge and support the central role professional women can play in further developing a dynamic and competitive ICT sector. Indeed, the growing demand for a range of ICT skills around the globe presents a unique window of opportunity to properly position girls and women in the industry and to provide them with the required tools for success.

Parallel to the efforts of the United Nations, Arab countries have exerted efforts in the last few years to build the ICT sector.

Most of them have established national ICT policies and strategies geared towards strengthening their knowledge-based economies. But the majority of those strategies do not yet have a gender dimension. Equally, non-governmental organizations are also playing a major role in the ICT field at the regional and national levels. They have focused mainly on establishing ICT community centers and professional networks and increasing computer literacy among all segments of the society. Some of them have organized regional and international forums that aim to catalyze equitable socioeconomic change to support the empowerment of women through the effective use of ICT tools.⁸

In summary, ICTs define our modern era and positively affect development at the national and global levels. They have proven to increase employment opportunities, decrease poverty and empower disadvantaged populations, especially women and girls. If properly used, ICTs could ultimately contribute to gender equality, acknowledged as a basic human right enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and as one of the main objectives of the Millennium Development Goals.⁹ The rapidly evolving ICT field does indeed provide us with a golden opportunity to close the gender divide and improve the lives of men and women alike.¹⁰ Let us seize this opportunity now!

ECW at Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, 2012

The ESCWA Centre for Women (ECW), represented by Ms. Sukaina Al Nasrawi (Associate Social Affairs Officer), participated in the twelfth annual Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing, the world's largest gathering of women in computing.¹¹ The event was held at the Baltimore Convention Center in Maryland, USA, from 3 to 6 October 2012 under the principle banner theme "Are We There Yet?" to highlight the relationship between women and technology and women's constant struggle to benefit equally from technological developments and opportunities. The gathering constituted a forum for knowledge sharing and brought together specialists from across the globe.

Along with other Arab ICT experts, Ms. Al Nasrawi co-organized a panel discussion entitled "Arab Women in Computing: Challenges vs. Aspirations". It was the first of its kind in the history of the Conference, which had never before tackled the subject of Arab women and the challenges they face in the ICT sector. The panel discussed the best studies, tools and approaches that can be used to build the technical capacity of Arab women, and obstacles to their participation in that area.

The discussion highlighted the gap in ICT literacy and employment in addition to the opportunities and the diverse technical



Panelists from left to right: Ms. Sukaina Al Nasrawi, Ms. Katy Dickenson (moderator), Ms. Maysoun Ibrahim, Ms. Hania Gati and Ms. Reham Nasser

Moreover, the panel discussed the social and cultural obstacles that prevent young girls from embracing technology. It concluded with an overview of international, regional and national initiatives aimed to increase the participation of women in the ICT sector and to integrate them into the information society.

The ESCWA Centre for Women also participated in the 2011 Grace Hooper meeting. It intends to continue its involvement in that global event in the coming years as part of its commitment to expand knowledge and bring the issue of Arab women and ICT to the forefront. For more information about the Celebration please visit <http://anitaborg.org/initiatives/ghc/>.

Girls in ICT Portal: International Telecommunication Union Portal

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) launched a new web portal focused on helping girls and women access training, job opportunities and career information in the fast-growing ICT sector.¹² The portal is designed to help girls and young women to prepare for and pursue a career in technology. It houses hundreds of programmes, including scholarship programmes, contests and awards, training and internship opportunities, online networks offering career support and mentoring along with tech camps and "Girls in ICT Day" activities.



Moreover, the portal includes a link to a "Girls in ICT Toolkit", developed by ITU partner Global Network of Women ICT Decision Makers.¹³ It is notable that ITU celebrated World Telecommunication and Information Society Day under the theme 'Women and Girls in ICT' for the first time on 17 May 2012.¹⁴

¹ Judith Zubeita, 2010, "Women, Development, and the Knowledge Society in Latin America", paper presented at the *Expert Group Meeting on Women, Science and Technology*, Paris, 28 September to 1 October, pp. 2-3. Available from http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/gst_2010/Zubeita-EP.1-EGM-ST.pdf.

² World Economic Forum, 2012, *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, p. 17. Available from http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf.

³ International Telecommunication Union, 2011, *The Role of ICT in Advancing Growth in LDCs*. Available from http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ldc/turkey/docs/The_Role_of_ICT_in_Advancing_Growth_in_LDCs_Trends_Challenges_and_Opportunities.pdf.

⁴ See p. 8. The study is available from http://www.gbchealth.org/system/documents/category_1/359/Bridging-the-Gender-Divide-How-Technology-can-Advance-Women-Economically.pdf?1345230669.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶ Available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html>.

⁷ Available from <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>.

⁸ ESCWA, 2011, *Regional Profile of the Information Society in Western Asia*, p. 7.

⁹ For more information see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

¹⁰ Zubeita, op cit., p. 2.

¹¹ For more information see www.gracehopper.org.

¹² The portal is available from <http://www.girlsinict.org>.

¹³ More information is available from <http://www.itu.int/net/itunews/issues/2011/03/33.aspx>.

¹⁴ More information is available from <http://www.itu.int/en/wtisid/Pages/default.aspx>.

About The UN-ESCWA Centre for Women

The UN-ESCWA Centre for Women was established on 1 October 2003, following the adoption of Resolution 240(XXII). This resolution, recognizing that women's role is a fundamental part of effective development, called for the creation of a Committee on Women comprising the member countries, and for the establishment of a women's centre at ESCWA. Recently, the Centre was upgraded to a division, reflecting an enhanced commitment within ESCWA to women's empowerment and gender equality.

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.escwa.un.org

Contact Us:

ESCWA Centre for Women

United Nations
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
Riad El Solh Square, Beirut-Lebanon
Phone : +9611 981301 / Fax : +9611981510

