

Expert Group meeting to Review ICT policies from a Gender perspective, Bangkok, 18-19 December, 2001

UNESCO, ICT and Gender – a brief.

The issues:

Many gender disparities existing in society today have been reinforced by the formal school system, which educates boys and girls according to dominating norms and cultures in society. In most countries, if not all, formal school systems are designed to meet the needs of upper or middle class boys belonging to the mainstream population or ethnic group. Girls, minorities, disabled, children from poor or otherwise marginalized communities may – to the extent they are enrolled in school – attend classes but in many cases without full participation and maximum learning outcome.

It has been documented in many countries all over the world that girls' participation and achievement in science, math and technology subjects is lacking behind that of boys'. Especially in Europe, the United States and to some extent in Eastern and Southern Africa extensive research on the reasons for girls' lower achievement has been carried out and many experiments have been conducted aimed at finding ways of increasing girls' participation especially in the science subjects. Such research does not seem to have been carried out and shared as vigorously in the Asian and Pacific region.

With regard to ICT, it has been clearly documented in other Regions that girl's interest in computers, internet and IT is of a separate nature of that of boys, which is related to the way that girls and boys are, more or less universally, socialized. Unless these issues are taken into consideration when deciding on how to use computers and information technology in schools, girls will continue to turn their back to ICT and as adult women be reluctant to enter this field both as producers and users.

Despite recent advances in women's use of ICTs however, women's access and utilization of ICTs continue to lag behind men creating a widening gender digital gap. Access to information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, is particularly difficult for women in poorer and less urbanized areas where telecommunications infrastructure is poor. The problem is not only the lack of access to computers, telephones and other resources. It also involves a severe absence of educational, training and application opportunities for women and girls. This will present a serious disadvantage for women in the workforce as the information economy demands an increasing level of technological literacy.

UNESCO's experience has validated the unprecedented demand for a wide array of training and education programs throughout the region, especially among women. Women's ICT training needs is varied, reflecting the spectrum of women's level of ICT use, understanding and engagement.

As part of the follow up to the World Education Forum, held in Dakar in April 2000, UNESCO will intensify its work aimed at broadening the understanding of what factors are affecting girls' participation and achievement in education, and how education systems can be re-organized to better promote gender equality in all spheres of life, also in ICT development.

Education Programmes:

Shortly, UNESCO Bangkok will be launching a **region wide project on Information and Communication Technologies in Education**, whose core components will be

- the development of national policy environments, which promote effective , affordable and sustainable use of ICT in education;
- Successful models which demonstrate the appropriate use of ICT and of relevant ICT-based curricula and teaching-learning materials in both formal and non-formal educational settings;
- Policies and Programs which promote the training and professional development of teachers and other educators in the use of ICT in education.

This program will pay special attention to how ICTs can promote greater participation and achievement of girls and women in education.

Since the mid-90'ies UNESCO has assisted a large number of countries in the Asian Region in establishing **Community Learning Centers (CLCs)** aimed at promoting literacy and non-formal education, skills training, and health information etc. The CLCs are providing a place from where education and training in a broad sense can be delivered by different governmental or non-governmental organizations Some of these are equipped with computers and would be a meaningful entry point for delivering training to women in ICT in a collaborative, non-threatening and non-competitive atmosphere.

Information & Communication Programmes:

With a view to promote women's right and social position in the dramatically changing information age, UNESCO, Asian Pacific Women's Information Network Center (APWINC) and the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (APCWNSP) are currently collaborating to build a Regional ICT center for Women, which can be further expanded to a Global ICT center for women.

The Online Learning Center (OLC) project is designed to build an operational learning cyber hub in Seoul, Republic of Korea, as a first step for building the Regional ICT Center for Women aiming at facilitating the development of women and ICT communities in the region. OLC will accommodate the following contents:

- a. ICT training materials for women, translated in various languages
- b. Resources for ICT trainers in the region
- c. Directory of women ICT trainers in Asia Pacific
- d. Calendars of ICT training, Gender and ICT related symposium and workshop
- e. Gender and ICT Policy issues

The first step towards developing the OLC was to hold a Trainers' Workshop in November 2001, which aimed to further asses the learning needs of women in the region and to enhance women's ICT capacities. The design and features of the OLC will be based on the recommendations made and results of the workshop.