WSIS+10 series: WSIS+10 and Women's Empowerment

During the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), leaders from various countries came together and affirmed that the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) provided a wealth of opportunities for women, and that women should be an integral part of the information society. It called for removing the gender barriers to ICT education and training, and promoting equal training opportunities in ICT-related fields for women and girls. In the fifth and final blog in a series on WSIS+10 edited by LSE alumna Anri van der Spuy, Doreen Bogdan-Martin, chief of strategic planning and membership at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), investigates the role of ICTs in perpetuating gender divides and promoting gender equality in the future.

Twenty years ago, the Beijing Declaration set the most important global overarching framework for gender empowerment in the world. The Declaration called for equal and affordable access to economic resources, including information and communication. Though some progress has been made towards achieving these (and related WSIS) goals, we still have a very long way to go. Gaps remain in four main areas: access, opportunities, leadership and the role women play in producing and being represented in content like news media.

Minding the gaps

ITU data suggests that the access gap where women are concerned – otherwise known as the digital gender divide – remains large, with 200 million fewer women than men online by the end of 2013, and over 1.7 billion women worldwide who do not own a mobile phone.

But equality of access does not imply equality of opportunity.

Looking at just the leadership gap, for instance, it's great to see women running tech companies like Yahoo, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Oracle, and Xerox, but only 26 of the Fortune 500 companies had a female CEO by the end of 2014 – a mere 5%. On the government side, four years ago, we had a total of 25 women ministers out of 193 United Nations member states. Today we have 15. Similarly, of the 161 independent telecommunications regulators across the world, only 12 are led by women.

In respect of gender inequalities where content is concerned, a recent study into representation in news media shows that only 26% of the people in online news stories and news tweets combined are women.

Besides these imbalances, women who do benefit from access and opportunities may find their online participation and human rights being limited and/or curtailed as a result of incidences of online abuse and gender-based violence that are related to existing gender inequalities and discrimination. Examples of such incidents include infringements of privacy, surveillance and monitoring, harassment, damaging reputation and/or credibility, direct threats of violence and blackmail.

These and other indicators signal gender imbalances in a sector that has huge potential for women in terms of employment, entrepreneurship and innovation. Judging from these and other statistics, however, women and girls may be left on the margins of the future knowledge society and the next industrial revolution.

From goals to actions: WSIS and beyond

The good news is that women's empowerment has been placed at the heart of the global agenda. The newly adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals recognise the importance of technology as a tool to achieve gender equality: Goal 5 is to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. At the Beijing+20 event in September this year, which reviewed progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 20 years after its adoption at the Fourth World Conference on Women, some 80 world leaders committed to ending discrimination against women by 2030. They also announced measurable actions to oversee this goal. But these commitments need to be translated into actionable policies and practices.

Along with many other UN agencies, ITU participated in the important WSIS+10 review that took place this week at the UN headquarters in New York. This review process recognises the gender digital divide as an urgent issue. In its final outcome document, endorsed by member states of the UN this week, it has called for greater action to close the gap.

Paragraph 27 of the final WSIS outcome document explicitly emphasises concerns about the gender digital divide that persists with regards to ICT access and use, as well as in ICT education, employment and other economic and social development factors. It not only 'agrees to mainstream gender in the WSIS process', but also calls for urgent measures to achieve gender equality among Internet users by 2020. The need to take 'immediate measures' to enhance women and girls' education and to enhance their participation in ICTs as users, content creators, employees, entrepreneurs, innovators and leaders is stressed. This is important. Finally, it reaffirms a commitment to ensuring women's full participation in decision-making processes that relate to ICTs.

Going forward

2015 has been a year of action. Looking at the Beijing+20 commitments and the call for action on gender equality in the WSIS+10 outcome document, I am hopeful that we will see a future of gender equality throughout the entire ICT ecosystem. Without strong commitments and specific actions to achieve tangible gender equality, however, women stand to be left out of the many benefits ICTs can offer. We must ensure that does not happen.

This blog gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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