Access and More

A t no time can we recall civil society paying as much attention to the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as in the last five years. There are two reasons for this: first, the rapid development in the technologies themselves that also brought about the resurgence of the Internet since the New Communication Order in the 1970s, and second, civil society's increased use of ICTs, which has allowed them to organise, network, campaign, and bring about social actions differently.

For the women's movement, the new ICTs are also a central issue because of the benefits and opportunities they present to those in a position to tap into their potential. However, many women's organisations are at the same time also concerned about the impact on women of the widening gap in terms of access to ICTs (or the lack thereof).

The gap between the information 'haves' and 'have-nots,' commonly referred to as the "digital divide," has thus become an overarching concern for civil society, private sector, governments, and intergovernmental organisations including the United Nations. In the coming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), ensuring women's access to the new ICTs is a common agenda for all these social actors. Touted as the first high-level international gathering of all key stakeholders to develop a better understanding of the information revolution and its impact on the international community and on development, the Summit has contributed in opening up more discussion spaces on gender and the new ICTs.

This issue of *Women in Action* examines the different questions around gender and ICTs with the hope of evolving a critical position that can be presented not only in the WSIS but in many other venues where these issues are taken up. We have invited experts such as Nancy J. Hafkin and Sonia Jorge who discuss why it is imperative to consider gender from the beginning of the design of ICT projects. In their article "Get In and Get Early: Ensuring Women's Access to and Participation in ICT Projects," Hafkin and Jorge caution that the number of women involved in project design and implementation, or as participants, is not a guarantee of gender awareness.

In "Moulding ICT to Their Needs: Kerala's Women Overcome their Misgivings," Prema Nair talks about the paradoxical situation in Kerala, India where despite the high educational attainment, women remain invisible in technical spheres including ICTs. Nair tells us that majority of the computer companies in this Indian state prefer men to women as long-term investment, especially in the area of product development, because of the misperception that women are less experimental. There is also the common perception that women cannot cope with the demands of full time ICT-based work and that their priorities revolve around their families.

Doe Mayer and Barbara Pillsbury, in their article "Women Connect!" share with us the experiences from a project that aimed to help women's NGOs become more strategic and participatory in their use of communication by combining the new ICTs with traditional and mass media. The campaign for the Right to Communicate is highlighted in this issue by Sally Burch, who posits that this is not just a legal-juridical issue. The threats to the recognition of this right, she stresses, vary from outright censorship to monopolistic concentration [of ownership], from the imposition of a single cultural model to international pressure to deregulate the industry and privatise the airwaves.

Isis considers the call for women's involvement in gender and ICT policy discussions, including the WSIS, as one important way of asserting our overall social justice and gender concerns. However, we would also like to stress that it is crucial for the diversity of women's experiences to be taken into consideration in the formulation of guiding principles for the Information Society. One particular issue for women that we are looking at with critical lenses is how perspectives on women and ICTs are arrived at. Currently, given the wide spectrum of actors engaged in discussions of gender and ICT issues, there is a tendency for the least common denominator among all the issues—that is access to ICTs, to be put forward as the key concern. Other issues such as democratisation of the media; globalised information economy—with the U.S. at the forefront and Southern countries remain at the periphery as suppliers of cheap labour and raw materials; and the quality and relevance of information posted on the web or circulated through other forms of ICTs are concerns important to women in the South but are not put forward as part of a broader platform for the sake of reaching consensus.

Another concern that needs greater discussion is that ensuring access does not necessarily mean providing the appropriate tools and guaranteeing effective use. Neither does it necessarily equate to women's empowerment and gender equality. And for women from the global South, the struggle for gender equality is linked to the broader social justice movements that are advocating the diversity of views, opinions, content, and information and respect for indigenous and localised knowledge systems.

The well-known fact that women are not a monolithic nor a unidimensional category holds true in this issue as well. Women's realities greatly vary depending on their socio-cultural, political and economic contexts as well as their geo-political locations, and many other factors. Women's access, therefore, is really about creating the conditions necessary to make accessing information via electronic means a truly useful and effective tool. In other words, absent the rhetoric and the jargon, the agenda is that women should be able to evaluate the efficacy of the new ICTs and make their choices according to their **usefulness and appropriateness**. No more, no less.