Young Women's Participation in International Conferences in the New Information Society By Jennifer Cottes

The information society, driven by the "new" information and communication technologies (ICTs), has a dangerous potential to further marginalise young women from voicing their concerns. For example, ICTs are key to international conferences for organising and determining participation. Organisers of international conferences see the Internet as their primary tool for inviting and registering delegates, soliciting and posting background papers, displaying the agenda, announcing coinciding events, and delivering timely information on issues related to the subject at hand. The Internet is an efficient tool, allowing organisers to ignore geography and reduce the costs of communication. Often, ICTs are used for consultations, exchanges of information and the building of relationships leading up to a conference, which in turn effects the structure of the overall agenda and the list of delegates. In fact, much of the action taken following the event is a direct result of the actual process of organising the event itself.

Young women who typically attend such conferences are likely to be the ones who are communicating over the web, who are part of the 'correct' networks (on and off-line), and who in general contain knowledge of the issues, and the enthusiasm and capability to work with that knowledge. Maitreyi Doshi and Titilayo Akinsanmi are excellent examples of such young women. Maitreyi is a young woman pursuing a political science degree in India while she teaches IT skills to destitute children. She participated in conferences such as the International Education and Research Network (iEARN, 2000 China), Junior Summit held by MIT Media Lab (1998, USA), the preparatory meetings for the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) (2002, Switzerland) and the WSIS Asia regional meeting (Japan, 2002).[1]

Titilayo is a young Nigerian content developer who devotes much of her time to ICTs for development. She was also a participant in the second WSIS preparatory meeting and conferences such as the Nigerian Youth Info Technology Policy Summit 2002, Youth Employment Summit 2002 (Egypt), and Young Women Leaders in ICTs in 2003 (Egypt). In addition to their physical presence, Titilayo and Maitreyi were also participants in on-line consultations and discussions leading up to some of these events. Both these young women have a grasp of gender issues and work to represent youth (male and female alike) of different socio-economic backgrounds. Maitreyi and Titilayo are harnessing the benefits of ICTs as an empowerment tool for themselves and for other youth in their community and abroad.

ICTs have also helped both to gain and share knowledge and to be visible to others with common concerns. Their visibility and influence on-line has led them to be invited and even funded to attend international conferences. Therefore, the use of ICTs has contributed to their capacity to participate in decision-making processes for development, such as those taking place at international conferences.

Various factors influencing disparities in access to ICTs include income levels, education, literacy, language, race, ethnicity and geography. In addition to these barriers, women face additional circumstances commonly referred to as the 'gender digital divide.' Although there are more young women like Maitreyi and Titilayo who are empowered by the use of ICTs and work to help others harness the same benefits, the gender-digital divide is very much a reality. "By now, it has become clear that many persistent gender-specific structural inequalities constitute barriers to women's access, such as education, traditional cultural beliefs and practices, economic inequality, etc."[2] More often than not, it is the wider socio-economic and cultural context that accounts for persistent barriers to women's access to and use of ICTs.

A synthesis paper for a virtual seminar series on gender and ICTs by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) listed the common accessibility barriers specific to women:
- lower levels of literacy and education, including training in languages predominantly used in ICT platforms and the Internet;
- less time due to women's triple role of domestic, productive and community management responsibilities, leading to a much longer workday than men's;

less access to financial resources to cover the cost of equipment and access; and

geographical location because in developing countries, women tend to live in rural areas where infrastructure is less dependable and travel to ICT centres more difficult due to cost, time and cultural reasons, more than men.

Supporters of ICTs for empowerment contend that women no longer have the luxury to ignore ICTs, as these are tools for active participation to improve their situations. For instance, access to information and improved communications can end the isolation of women and improve health, access to reproductive services, economic growth and poverty alleviation. Other studies are also focusing on the role that ICTs play in enabling women and their organisations to access and manage information for the purposes of lobbying, advocacy and organizing for change. By extension, ICT plays a role in enabling women to participate in major international events for these same purposes.

So, why is the physical presence of young women at international conferences important? When asked what makes the issues brought in by young women to international conferences distinct from the issues of women in general, Maitreyi said, "The difference is that these problems are spoken by young women for young women. They have experienced and/or seen these problems and therefore, they are very passionate about solving them. Youth already have so many [general] problems to deal with, and sometimes these specific issues get lost in the list of problems. Therefore it has a greater impact if [young] women are given a chance to speak about their problems."

Titilayo added: "More often than not, it is the same 'issues' but redefined and differentiated by their being 'young' (a phase that demands particular attention in itself)... 'Youth' is seen as

(from left to right) Maitreyi Doshi, iEARN, India; Itir Akdogan, Youth for Habitat, Turkey; Titilayo Akinsanmi, Paradigm Initiative Nigeria, Nigeria; and Maja Andjelkovic, International Insitute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Canada.

a transitional stage [and] one's being a woman makes her more open to these challenges or issues."

The participation of young women in the decision-making processes, such as international conferences, is crucial to a transition to gender equity. As young women share their anecdotal experiences, attention can be directed to the most urgent problems affecting them so that the issues do not sink into the interests of other groups. In addition to providing a platform for global dialogue, international conferences offer opportunities for partnerships to form, for experts to come together to make decisions on policies and research—in essence, shape the future of development. The empowerment of women can be seen as "a process that enables women to gain access to decision-making processes and instances of power [which in turn,]...embodies challenging patriarchy at all levels of expression: social structures and relationships, moral and cultural values and norms, and institutions and power structures."[3] As such, this information is best understood by the collection of anecdotal experiences of young women.

Wessam Abdou, of Alexandria, Egypt, is an example of a young woman embedded in a socio-cultural environment where the knowledge of women is seen as less valuable than that of men, and where women are often considered unproductive members of society. She

and her brother, Mahmoud Magdy Abdou, were both volunteers at the Youth Employment Summit 2002 last September.

Wessam is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Fine Arts, while Mahmoud recently obtained his Microsoft Accreditation from a local college. Although his older sister has had more years of education than him, Mahmoud believes it is more likely that he will succeed in his career than Wessam will in hers. (Due to a language barrier, Mahmoud spoke on behalf of his sister.) He went on to explain that because women are not considered productive members of society, it is not within the Egyptian society's culture for a woman to make decisions. The family makes her life decisions and after she marries, her husband will make decisions for her.

For example, if Wessam wanted to marry a particular person, her family would have the final say. She would not have studied Fine Arts if her family did not tell her to do so. In fact, young Egyptian women would often simply wait for instructions, and if instructions never came, there would be no major changes in their lives. Mahmoud and Wessam grew up in the same household under the same economic conditions, yet will lead very different lives. Wessam has concerns about her life, family and future success, yet she would not have been a participant in an international conference such as YES had her brother not told her to.

It is no surprise that cultural norms and socio-economic conditions may leave young women less predisposed to participate in development decisions, for example, by sharing their experiences at international conferences. However, if societies such as Egypt are to become a nation of empowered women and gender equality, the inclusion of these young women in decision-making processes is essential. ICTs have the potential to educate and engage these young women in dialogue and decisions that directly affects their lives. In the same way, if women do not realise the potential of ICTs and the information society, there is a danger for them to be further marginalised from the development agenda.

ICTs are no panacea to development for gender equality or human development but ICTs have the potential to further enable young women to be included in the decision-making processes in international development, and ultimately, in their community. Against these challenges to gender equality and democratic inclusion in the information society, Titilayo has an inspirational anecdote of her experiences with international conferences and her development efforts: "Its been an interesting experience thus far. I am young, female and black from the South—a very interesting combination. For a long while I did not see it as a 'barrier,' but in the last seven months, I have come to realise that in the devel-

opment work I am building, I have to put in a lot of extra [effort] to make an impact on my generation and others than I ever thought of before. And I will do it. I am fascinated by...how much one life touched can make a difference!" ☽

Footnotes

[1] The summit proper will be held in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, see <http://www.wsis.org>.

[2] "Overcoming the Gender Digital Divide: Understanding ICTs and their Potential for the Empowerment of Women," by Sophia Huyer and Tatjana Sikoska, April 2003, United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). For more information, see <http://www.un-instraw.org>.

[3] INSTRAW, April 2003. For more information see: <http://www.un-instraw.org>.