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## **Policy-making about information and communication technologies: Where are women voices?**

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

At the end of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process, which culminated in two international gatherings at Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005), Annabelle Sreberny lamented “the tension between WSIS and the ‘real world’ politics of gender where the ongoing lack of gender balance in the political sphere, in media-decision-making, in business and academe around the world challenges the rhetorical gesture toward gender-mainstreaming” (Sreberny, 2005: 24).

What has changed? Leading up to the year 2015, the United Nations has planned a series of consultations to help shape the post-2015 agenda with support from civil society coalitions such as the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Global Call to Action Against Poverty, CIVICUS, and the Beyond 2015 Campaign.

APC has taken the lead in surveying “The status of critical communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – a report documenting civil society perceptions”. A draft was published in April 2013 which can be found here:

<http://www.apc.org/en/projects/communications-rights-ten-years-after-wsis-civil-s>

The purpose of the survey was to collate civil society perceptions of the changes that have taken place over the last ten years since the WSIS Declaration of Principles was adopted in 2003. The results are being used as input to the formal WSIS review process, as well as to strategise around civil society joint agendas and common positions. To that extent it contributes towards addressing two problems:

- \* An apparent absence – in most parts of the world – of a people-centred approach to information and knowledge-sharing society policy and regulation;
- \* The fragmentation of the communications rights movement, which had mobilised so intensively to ensure that a people-centred approach informed the outcomes of WSIS.

APC also coordinated the development of a paper by its Women’s Rights Programme as part of a global thematic consultation on “Addressing inequalities – The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All”. The paper is called *Going visible: Women’s rights on the internet*.

It argues that with regard to information and communication technologies (ICT) and the Internet, “Women may not have been an active part of policy-making conversations when internet governance started, but the rapid pace of change online means they need to participate now to ensure that the future of the internet is shaped taking into account women’s rights.”

The report quotes Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, who in 2011 told the UN Human Rights Commission that:

“The right to freedom of opinion and expression is as much a fundamental right on its own accord as it is an “enabler” of other rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, such as the right to education and the right to take part in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications, as well as civil and political rights, such as the rights to freedom of association and assembly. Thus, by acting as a catalyst for individuals to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, the Internet also facilitates the realization of a range of other human rights” (La Rue, 2011, para 22).

The report argues that it is important to include a women’s rights perspective to move the development of Internet and ICT policies forward. It emphasised the need to strengthen the implementation of recommendations made during the WSIS process that reaffirmed the need to include women in discussions and decision-making about how such policies are implemented. Those recommendations “not only lay the foundation for the development of global communications, but also the management of policies that impact on people’s rights.”

For women, the Internet is seen as a vital public sphere that help overcome barriers to media or political representation. Inequalities that women face in terms of economic power, education and access to resources also affect participation in shaping the Internet, its debates and policy. “For those who have little access to other kinds of ‘publics’ due to the multiple forms of discrimination faced – including based on gender, age, economic status and sexual identity – it can be a particularly important space for the negotiation and fulfilment of their rights.”

Going *visible: Women’s rights on the internet* concludes with the following recommendations:

**To governments and international organisations:**

- \* Promote respect for human rights online and offline. Freedom of expression and opinion must be protected online, the same way they are protected offline. There is need to understand the nature of communications in the online and the offline worlds in order to correctly identify where these freedoms are exercised and what threats may be posed to these freedoms.
- \* Promote ICT use and a strategy of information, education and communication in online spaces to combat violence against women and girls and to enhance women’s and girls’ rights.
- \* Promote women’s and girls’ communication rights in ICT use and online spaces, encouraging their participation, content creation and freedom of expression.
- \* Engage in the political discussion about the promotion of internet development and internet governance with a vision of gender inclusion, gender justice and respect for human rights.
- \* Promote and encourage women’s participation in decision-making processes in ICT policies to secure that women’s and girls’ needs are properly considered, included and safeguarded.
- \* Protection and promotion of women’s human rights cannot be left to private corporations, ISPs or individuals. States and international bodies have a moral and legal responsibility to uphold and safeguard the rights of women, both online and offline. Transparent, accountable decision-making on decisions to block or restrict content, and a right to redress, for example, are vital in upholding women’s human rights.

**To the private sector:**

- \* Internet and telecommunications businesses such as social networking platforms, web hosting companies and mobile phone operators should develop corporate user

policies and practices that respect women's rights. This includes the adequate representation of women in policy-making and standards-setting processes, and ensuring that policies and standards consider the safety and security of users.

**To civil society organisations:**

- \* Women's organisations are called on to take action and use ICT for activism to combat violence against women, promote equality and build solidarity. Women should take actions to control technology and change power relations in the ICT field.
- \* Women's organizations must actively participate in movements for communication rights on the internet and affirm women's achievements and full participation in society, both online and offline.

*Going visible: Women's rights on the internet.* Women's Rights Programme. Association for Progressive Communications (ACP). October, 2012. Source:  
<http://www.apc.org/en/pubs/going-visible-women%E2%80%99s-rights-internet>

**References**

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