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Gender and ICT

There is irrefutable evidence which substantiates that societies that discriminate by gender have to pay a very high price in terms of their ability to develop and to reduce poverty. Women because of their biological and social roles are generally more rooted than men in

the confines of their home and locality. They are therefore more aware than men of the social, economic and environmental needs of their communities. The issues of gender equality, equity and empowerment of women have become much more significant as women have strategic

roles in the acquisition and communication of critical knowledge which forms the basis of survival for communities to adjust and reduce risks in adverse circumstances. Women have been the traditional possessors and communicators of knowledge relating to storage, food processing and indigenous health practices. Such forms of knowledge are often rooted in experience and experiments. Therefore, it is essential for any knowledge sharing mechanism to recognize the value of knowledge possessed by women. This recognition forms the basis of evolution equal contributors and end users of knowledge in a knowledge society.

Use of ICT for women empowerment: Information and communication technology is emerging as the technology of the new millennium all over the world. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General declared on the floor of the UN General Assembly in 2002 that global informa-

tion through ICT would promote economic growth, eliminate poverty and allow low income developing countries to leapfrog to the level of advanced countries. If the concept of global information has to become a reality, gender concerns also need to be integrated. A focus on the gender dimension of information and communication technologies is essential not only for preventing an adverse impact of the digital revolution on gender equality or the perpetuation of existing inequalities and discrimination but also for enhancing women's equitable access to the benefits of information and communication technologies and to ensure that they become a central tool for the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. Therefore, supporting women's participation in the information economy would produce a range of benefits as listed below. Increasing the pool of human resources comprising men and women will contribute

to increased productivity, creativity, expertise and competitiveness in the technology sector of a country, and will allow the nation to quickly arrive at a critical mass of IT professionals to facilitate an information economy. ICT networks deliver benefits to all segments of population so that they are responsive to the poorest and the marginalized which include the women folk. Thus, information and communication technologies work as powerful tools in promoting social inclusion.

It is beyond doubt that access to ICT knowledge is crucial for women empowerment and development. However, it is found that women in developing countries have been traditionally excluded from access to such information both deliberately as well as due to the factors which inherently work to their disadvantage such as little freedom of movement and low education levels. Affirmative action is needed for the empowerment of women in

all the fields as stated above. Furthermore, it is here ICT come to the rescue of women. ICTs open up a direct window for women to the outside world. With ICT, information now flows to them without any distortion or any form of restriction and they have access to same information as their male counterpart. This has led to broadening of perspectives, building up of greater understanding of their current situation and causes of poverty and initiation of interactive processes for their development. Also women face time constraints due to their traditional family responsibilities. However, now ICT has minimized the role of time and distance. Women, who form 50 per cent of world population, therefore, can work from anywhere and at any time and raise extra income to raise their quality of life and to become financially more independent and empowered.