Overview
From its recent emergence, in the nineties, as an exciting tool with myriad possibilities, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly seen as underpinning a new social paradigm, called the information society (IS). It is also widely recognized now that there is a need to go beyond seeing ICTs as ‘tools’, to considering them as co-constituting reality\(^1\). Thus, a useful framework to understand these contemporary changes is to see ICTs not merely as instruments for possible social, economic and political action, but a ‘medium’ through which social, economic and political relations are getting reconfigured and taking new shape\(^2\).

From a gender and development perspective, such a framework that constructs ICTs as a constitutive element of a new systemic social architecture provides an opportunity to see them as a possible site for social transformation – to leap-frog stages in institutional development and to effect structural changes for a just and equal society. The main imperative here is to understand and acknowledge the gender dimensions of these changes and to suitably engender information society policies.

Information society changes bring both new challenges and opportunities in respect of gender equality. On the one side, the IS phenomenon is in the danger of being instrumentalised and co-opted by dominant ideologies, including of market fundamentalism and of patriarchy, and this, inter alia, is undermining policy and other social gains achieved in respect of gender and development. Within arenas of policy, ‘privatised governance’, is getting increasingly legitimised, and consequently, women are being left unsheathed from the many protections and enablements that they have hitherto looked to the state to provide. The alluring logic of ‘when there is more for everyone now, why raise divisive issues of power relationships’, there is a danger that we may be going back to treating women as a ‘problem category’ with ‘special needs’ in a Women In Development – WID approach, rather than address complex issues of gender relations.

On the other side, access to new ICTs has the kind of inherent emancipatory possibilities that mass education provided to women. Because of the multi-dimensional manner in which ICTs interact with social structures, their impact on unequal gender relations is likely to be forceful and transformatory at deeper structural levels. And therefore, while ICTs may be seen as a medium reshaping society, ICTs themselves need to be shaped by a vision of gender equality, and this requires that we understand how gender plays out in the IS. Gender connects with the IS at various levels with policy implications – as a


\(^2\) Gender Analysis of National Information Society Policy of The Republic Of Macedonia, Bobi Badarevski, Skopje, 2005, see.oneworld.net/filemanager/download/1175/summary_and_recommendation_ICT.pdf
sector of production (implicating issues of jobs, entrepreneurship, education, capacity building etc), as media (for women’s voice and participation) and as a system builder for new institutional frameworks (in areas of health, governance, development delivery, social organizing and advocacy, community knowledge systems, etc).

The objective and plan of action of this CoE on gender, development and IS policies (CoE-GDISP) is to examine the complex relationship between gender, development and IS policies, and to feed the emerging understanding into policy processes at local, national and global levels. We believe that within the new information and communication paradigm, technological models must converge with empowering possibilities for social equity and gender justice. The value of this CoE therefore is fundamental to the vision of equitable development that the UN GAID is pursuing.

Objectives of the CoE
The objectives of the CoE-GDISP are to:

- Build a platform of women’s organisations to engage in IS policy advocacy from a gender and development perspective.
- Undertake research and pursue other forms of knowledge and expertise building.
- Provide online and face-to-face platforms for a sustained dialogue among this community of organisations on IS issues, for developing new concepts and analytical frameworks, and for the articulation of policy recommendations with respect to gender and development.
- Extend linkages of this group to local and implementation levels of ICTD projects working for women’s empowerment, and with progressive community based organisations and movements.
- Develop linkages to policy making mechanisms/ bodies at national and global levels, especially with UN organisations, and harness the platform’s international character for this purpose.
- Make a significant impact on shaping and developing IS policies by claiming an active role in the policy processes at national, regional and global levels.

Organising and Working Methods
The CoE-GDISP will be organised as a loose network. It will bring together two separate constituencies - organisations already engaged in gender and ICT advocacy and organisations with a history of global engagement in gender, development and rights. This synergy between two different starting points to address gender in policy will be a great asset to inform and influence information society policy processes. One of the main objectives of this CoE will also be to reach out through its work to many more gender activists and organisations in order to broad-base a gender and IS perspective.

In terms of policy advocacy, the CoE takes off from the significant work done by the Gender Caucus and the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group of the WSIS. Many of these organisations are part of the present CoE. The CoE also hopes to function like and develop linkages with specialised networks like the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), and APC Women’s Networking Support Program (APCWNSP). It will work with other gender and ICT advocacy groups like the Gender in WSIS Implementation Network.
(GENWIN) initiated within the context of the first UN-Internet Governance Forum, for
contributing to agenda-setting of the IGF II and subsequent activities. The CoE-GDISP
will also set up a web site that provides a networking space, linkages to resources, and
policy inputs.

The CoE’s work methods will be organised around four functions. It will:
- Act as a platform for policy dialogue\(^3\)
- Reach out to organisations at local, national and global levels to mainstream a
gender, development and IS perspective.
- Undertake research, knowledge development and dissemination
- Interface with policy bodies/agencies/mechanisms

**Activity Focus**
Activities of advocacy, research and knowledge development and dissemination will be
organised around the significant areas of intersection between gender, development and
the information society, with a strong policy focus. The community’s expertise comes
from the present pursuits of its individual members. The broad thematic activity areas
where the focus will be to examine the embedded gender, development and IS aspects
are as follows:

- Globalization, work and the information society
- Education, skill building and equal participation of women in the information
society paradigm\(^4\)
- Gender, identity and digital spaces - opportunities and challenges
- Media, community and networking in the information society
- Gendered dimensions of institutional and structural changes in the information
society

The attempt will be to develop research and policy frameworks that can combine efforts
of, develop synergies between, and throw up new possibilities from, existing and new
initiatives. Some examples of such ongoing efforts which will yield policy insights are as
follows:
- An ongoing research that integrates a gender perspective to a programme on
censorship and surveillance practices in the Asian region that combines both
technical and contextual interrogation, and focuses on filtering software and
techniques. (lead organisation – APCWNSP)
- The development of a curriculum on Internet Governance to bring the Arctic rim to
the development of knowledge concerning Internet Governance and the Information
Society, with a clear focus on gender aspects. (by the Division of Gender, technology
and organization, Lulea University of Technology)
- Research and action on the public policy implications for gender in relation to IT
education and ICT literacy within the formal and informal education systems in

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\(^3\) As per GAID’s mission statement

\(^4\) In this area we will seek close collaboration with the GAID CoE on *Women and ICT Taskforce*,
also since there are a few common members between the two CoEs.
Latin America. (anchored through the UNESCO Regional Chair for Latin America on Women, Science and Technology)

- The ‘Information Society for the South’ project of IT for Change, India which seeks to build a southern discourse on the IS, focusing also on gender dimensions.

**Governance of the Structure**

The CoE-GDISP will operate through a rotating secretariat. At this point, the secretariat is functioning out of the office of IT for Change, Bangalore India. Discussions on governance processes and structures are continuing. It is expected that there will be a core working group and a broader membership group.

**Members**

- **Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI), Ecuador**
- Association for Progressive Communications - Women’s Networking Support Program (APC WNSP)
- Asia Pacific Women’s Information Network Centre (APWINC), South Korea
- Centre for Feminist Research and Action, Dominican Republic
- Centre for Women’s Research (CENWOR), Sri Lanka
- Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia – Commonwealth of Learning (CEMCA, COL)
- Department of Gender, Technology and Organization, Luleå University of Technology, Sweden
- Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)
- femLINK PACIFIC: Media Initiatives for Women, Fiji Islands
- Hengasara Hakkina Sangha (HHS), India
- Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (HIVOS)
- International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) – Asia
- International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC), USA
- ISIS International Manila
- IT for Change, India
- Jagori – Women’s Training, Documentation and Resource Center, India
- Manushi, India
- Radio Internacional Feminista (FIRE), Costa Rica
- Shirkat Gah – Women’s Resource Centre, Pakistan
- Terre des Femmes, Germany
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
- Women’s Net, South Africa

**List of supporting Individuals**

- Florence Etta, member of the steering committee, of the erstwhile Gender Caucus of WSIS
- Gloria Bonder, UNESCO Regional Chair for Latin America on Women, Science and Technology
- Magaly Pazello, member of the steering committee, of the erstwhile Gender Caucus of WSIS