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Press Release

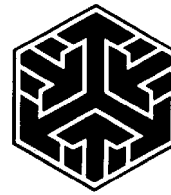
ISLAMABAD: (August 11, 2008) the experts underscore the need for focusing on women especially rural women through access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) which is a tools that empowers individuals and society especially the marginalized at large to bring about liberty and choices. They urged gender specific policies, socio cultural awareness and local content development, use of innovative tools, liberty of control, realistic understanding of ground realities, capacity building of communities and replication of successful international experiences in Pakistan to empowerment women technologically which impacts their social life.

SDPI Consultant, Imran Sikandar Baloch gave a presentation at a seminar on “Information and communication technologies for women’s empowerment” while Najma Sadeque of Shirkat Gah and Syed Hasnat Masood of Telenor reviewed his presentation. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) organized the seminar on Monday. Mushtaq Ahmad Bhatti, director telecom, Ministry of Information Technology presided over the proceedings while Dr. Karin Astrid Siegmann of SDPI moderated the proceedings.

Imran Sikandar Baloch urged that every intervention should focus on marginalized and vulnerable sections of society especially rural women. He said due to several myths and stereotypes in the society, women are denied access and control of several useful information and communication technologies (ICTs) of today, which critically affects their economic, socio-cultural, familial, legal, political and psychological development. He recommended women empowerment framework consisting welfare, access, awareness raising, mobilization and control as central guidelines for any policy or initiative adding that private sector, government, international organizations and civil society should join hands and create synergies in their inventions and specifically focus women. He said that ICT networks the society through information and knowledge while digital gender divide or exclusion of women causes poverty, inequality and injustice thus hinders their empowerment and restricts them from enjoying the benefits of mainstream economic, social and political advances, which otherwise ICTs have brought in their countries.

Providing international case studies of how ICTs have been used for women’s empowerment, Imran Sikandar highlighted the successful experiences of ICT use by Morrocon women weavers for marketing of their products, mp3 devices for women’s political education in Afghanistan, Bangladesh’s Pallitathya telephonic help line which met a lot of interest amongst rural women in particular as well as the projection of products made by the Muslim Seelampur community in the Indian capital Delhi. Interventions like these may support women’s empowerment in a context where they experience severe marginalisation. He lamented over the situation of Pakistan as it ranks 135 out of 177 on the human development index of the UNDP, 151 out of 156 countries at the gender development index and at 82 out of 93 at the gender empowerment measure.

In her comments on the case studies presented, Najma Siddique, Director Green Economics Initiative at Shirkat Gah, Karachi, agreed that ICTs have a lot of potential for supporting women’s empowerment. She emphasized the role of the television, in particular, which reaches a huge portion of the rural population. However, most private channels are only accessible via satellite dishes – and are thus unaffordable for the majority of the rural poor. The Pakistan Television Corporation on the other hand seems to take very little interest in taking up issues of girls’ education or health, which are of interest to women in rural areas. Ms. Siddique also cautioned that development issues, such as basic literacy, deserve



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attention on a priority basis before ICT technology and computer technology development are addressed. “technology is a double-edged sword.”, she concluded. Depending on in whose hands it is it can prove very beneficial for human development – or further aggravate existing social marginalisation.

Syed Hasnat Masood, Director Corporate Communications, Telenor Pakistan, provided his views on “ICTs for women’s empowerment from a corporate perspective. In his eyes, innovative ICT products cannot be designed at any company headquarter but need to be developed at the local level, with local entrepreneurs and community-based organizations, taking ground level realities into account. Once this is the case, ICT products for the poor can actually be very profitable and thus both be beneficial for the rural population and for the service provider. The financial sustainability, however, is the bottom line. According to him men as a consumer group are a “low-hanging fruit”, i.e. easily accessible. The question here arises how the double goal of women’s interest and profit for the provider can be achieved.

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