

## **Press Release**

ISLAMABAD: (August 13, 2009) The rapid increase of mobile phone penetration in Pakistan during the past decade is insufficient to enable rural women's access to telecommunication. Rather than availability of network coverage and mobile phones alone, socio-cultural factors need to be considered to ensure that the potential of information and telecommunication technologies (ICTs) reach female users in rural areas and contribute to their empowerment. These were the main conclusions of a study on "The Gender Digital Divide in Rural Pakistan" that the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) conducted. It was launched during the 55<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Study Group on Information Technology and Telecommunications held in a local hotel today. The lead researcher, Dr. Karin Astrid Siegmann, emphasised that the government should not neglect 'old' ICTs such as radio and TV in its efforts to harness the potential of ICTs for greater gender equality. According to her research results, these technologies are more accessible for female users, e.g. in terms of the permission required for their use and the necessary language skills.

The Study Group Meeting titled "Women and ICTs: Exclusion or Empowerment?" was also addressed by Chief Guest Mushtaq Ahmad Bhatti, Member (telecom), Ministry of Information Technology, Nazima Shaheen, Project Coordinator SDPI and Sana Shams, Senior Regional Research Officer, Center for Research in Urdu Language Processing (CRULP). Chairman Gallup Pakistan, Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani, presided over the meeting and initiated lively discussions. In his welcome note, Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director SDPI, maintained that: "Rural women's empowerment is key to reduce rural poverty." He highlighted the contributions of SDPI in policy research on gender as well as ICT issues.

Nazima Shaheen presented on "ICTs for women's empowerment – learning from best practices". She provided examples from Pakistan and around the globe of how ICTs have contributed to women's empowerment in areas as diverse as business promotion, education as well as water and sanitation. While video clips helped rural women in NWFP to raise awareness about issues in water management and express their priorities to policy-makers and officials in the Public Health Engineering Department, mobile phones provided by the Foundation of Occupational Development (FOOD) to women micro-entrepreneurs in various cities of Tamil Nadu, India reduced their dependency on middle-men. This network has enabled the women entrepreneurs to increase their profits, the volume of their sales and to extend their marketing reach into new urban areas. Computer literacy training has been provided to more than 2,500 women from rural areas in Pakistan in Community Technology Learning Centers established by the Pakistan National Commission for Human Development (NCHD). This way, the female trainees do not only access and build relevant skills, but also enhance their chances to find remunerative employment. Based on these national and international best practices, Ms. Shaheen underlined that there is a need to understand and transform technology according to the people's needs. She also highlighted the positive role public-private partnerships can play for the use of various ICTs for greater gender equality and women's empowerment.

In her contribution titled "ICT education from a gender perspective", Sana Shams gave an over view of Dareecha. Dareecha is an organization working on localized information technologies. This involves the development of software that allows working with computer and internet in Urdu language and script. The organization provides ICT literacy for rural school students, equally targeting girls and boys. The basic purpose of ICT literacy provided by Dareecha is to provide skills in basic computer operations, web browsing, e-mail, instant messaging, word processing, graphics editing and webpage development. The organization has developed easily

understandable computer manuals in all these areas to support the training Dareecha imparts. Based on Dareecha's experience, Ms. Shams found that educational institutions provide an accessible and comfortable environment for girls in particular where they can enhance their ICT-related knowledge. She advised that if any ICT project is supposed to address and reduce gender imbalances, this objective needs to be formulated explicitly.

Mushtaq Ahmed Bhatti concluded the meeting by emphasizing ICTs' huge potential to transform the economy throughout the world. He said that women as half of the population cannot be neglected in the country's progress. He sees the Universal Service Fund used by the Government to extend ICT services to rural areas as an effective tool to reach out to women also.