



Socialist International Women

SIXTY SECOND COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN,  
NEW YORK, 12 – 23 MARCH 2018  
VISION STATEMENT

**CONNECTING RURAL WOMEN -  
E-DEVELOPMENT AND RURAL WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT**



*The publication has been printed with the financial support received by the European Parliament. Sole liability rests with the author and the European Parliament is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.*

*Party of European Socialists, 98 Rue du Trône, 1050 Brussels.*

**[www.pes.eu](http://www.pes.eu)**

SIXTY SECOND COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN,  
NEW YORK, 12 – 23 MARCH 2018  
VISION STATEMENT

**CONNECTING RURAL WOMEN -  
E-DEVELOPMENT AND RURAL WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In March 2018, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women will discuss the priority theme of challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. It will also review and appraise the implementation of strategies to increase and develop participation in and access of women to the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the advancement and empowerment of women overall. The Socialist International Women (SIW) warmly welcomes discussion of the challenges and potential solutions to these critically important issues.

The invaluable contributions of millions rural women to social nourishment, economic prosperity and community stability are vital to global sustainable development and the promotion of peace for the benefit of all citizens. Almost 46 per cent of the global female population live in rural environments<sup>6</sup> and they perform 43 per cent<sup>4</sup> of the physical work in agriculture worldwide. This figure increases to 80% in some of the largest agricultural regions such as Africa<sup>4</sup>. Rural women are immensely significant contributors to global food sources for urban as well as local populations and critical for the survival of our worldwide populations. They are vital to food security using their invaluable knowledge of the immediate effects of climate change on crops and livestock. They also demonstrate an acute awareness of and respect for biodiversity issues which can potentially destroy the agricultural viability of regions for generations to come. This information is essential in understanding and combating food scarcity and offers expert insight into maximising the yields from valuable natural resources.

Despite these facts many of these women suffer extreme poverty, higher levels of gender based violence than urban women and unacceptably low levels of maternal care and sexual healthcare. This results in high infant and child-birth mortality rates and increased risk of HIV and other potentially lethal and debilitating maladies. Access to education is more limited due to remote locations which decreases the likelihood of future opportunities to become literate and narrows future life choices. They are also less likely to have land ownership or tenure rights, meaning that they are legally dependent on men for the security of their homes and the earth they depend on for livelihoods.

Due to their often remote geographical locations rural women face unique challenges and are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and extreme poverty. The suffering of these women is far too often invisible within local and global communities and without support such as access to ICT resources will remain invisible. The negative impact of these factors results in a disproportionate number of women being unable to access essential information or receive support when they need it most. In addition, millions of rural women are denied a voice in political decisions which directly affect their daily lives which makes it less likely that positive change is forthcoming.

The causes of the issues which exist for women in rural communities are a part of the overall pandemic of gender inequality worldwide. The most frequent barriers to women's access to ICT solutions which may be of invaluable help include women's lack of access to financial and technological resources to buy equipment and services, patriarchal cultural restrictions on their use of time such as commitments to child-rearing, growing and gathering food and collecting water and derogatory attitudes to women's intelligence, capabilities and potential.

This distressing state of affairs remains a deeply concerning issue to be urgently addressed in the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide. It is also of vital importance that the knowledge and skills of rural women are shared and utilised to ensure sustainable food production within our increasingly unpredictable global weather patterns and climate.

In recognition of the critical challenges that women's lack of access to ICT presents the UN SDG5: 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' includes a specific target in relation to ICTs:

SDG5.B: Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

The key indicator for progress on this target is an increase in the proportion of women and girls who own a mobile telephone. At present an alarming 200 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone and 250 million fewer women than men use the internet<sup>2</sup>. It is essential that these figures change rapidly to empower more women and especially rural women to realise the vision of global gender equality by 2030.

For women in rural areas in particular mobile telephone ownership is the minimum crucial requirement for communication across remote regions. Owning a mobile telephone is a vital foundation in familiarity with ICTs and helps to build women's confidence in the use of technology. It is the first step towards progressing e-development and increasing ICT access for women in the future across the full spectrum of ICT capabilities such as internet and computer use.

The Socialist International Women (SIW) strongly believes these issues are solvable with the harnessing of robust political will, global cooperation and gender sensitive democratic governance.

The SIW is fully committed to the achievement of SDG5.B for the empowerment of rural women and all women in alignment with its overall vision of global gender equality and the full participation and access of women and girls to all forms of media and ICT by 2030.

### **Increasing access to ICTs for rural women and girls**

The definition of information and communication technology (ICT) refers to a wide range of technologies and equipment which enable global telecommunications access and interaction using voice, video and data (written information). These technologies provide the means to create, share, store and manage information almost anywhere on the planet.

Political will and intention have the biggest impact on the funding and availability of the digital infrastructure required to ensure reliable connections across rural regions. These include funds for the installation of cables and radio receiver dishes and towers, as well as establishing connections to satellite technology. In general rural areas remain behind urban areas in terms of the development of the infrastructure required to develop ICT capabilities. However, in recent years, directly due to economic and political pressures, this gap has begun to decrease. It is essential that this development continues at speed to ensure that the world's inhabitants can be truly interconnected and function as a 'global village' for the benefit of their economies and populations and sustainable development of all regions. It is also critical that the needs of rural women are prioritised within government and local ICT planning to ensure that they do not suffer as a result of being left behind in this technological revolution.

For some rural women the benefits of technology such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets and computers have positively changed millions of lives. Even the most basic mobile phone can connect rural women with friends and family, help create supportive social networks, encourage the sharing of agricultural and marketing knowledge and help ensure safety and welfare by enabling calling for help and support. A more advanced internet enabled smartphone can mean that even those who live in isolated regions in mountain villages or have nomadic lifestyles can access news and other essential information, such as extreme weather warnings, which can literally save the lives

of women and their families. The political power of women connected to each other in solidarity also opens up immense possibilities for participating in debates, watching and creating videos on key issues, grouping knowledge and resources and sharing experiences.

With more advanced technologies such as laptops and computers the possibilities for life enhancement in education and networking increase even further as detailed documentation can be produced, viewed, shared and marked by education professionals. The ability to be present in online groups such as e-Agriculture<sup>8</sup> where questions can be posed and answered wherever you are in the world can quickly enable rural women to increase their skills and knowledge and take their rightful place in the conversations, decision making and governance of their regions and nations. In addition, the capability to learn, communicate, be seen and heard and express their views form the basis of the true emancipation of rural women and the most desirable form of social democratic society.

Access to ICT improves not only social lives and educational possibilities but economic capabilities via wider exposure to buyers of goods and services and access to services such as e-banking and information regarding financial support through local grants. The potential that ITCs open up give rural women the tools to fully develop their potential and increase, on their own terms, their already immense contribution to their families and communities.

### **Access to ICTs and women's universal human rights**

The concept of the right to communications as a universal human right is expressed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) which was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly, also in 1966, and incorporated into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It states:

*"...a free, uncensored and unhindered press or other media is essential in any society to ensure freedom of opinion and expression,"*

*and*

*"...the public also has a corresponding right to receive media output."*

In social democratic societies with fair, just and gender sensitive governance the recognition and implementation of the right to communication is critical in protecting the human rights of all women and men. The unequal access of many women to ICTs amounts to a gross violation of their universal human right to communications and severely impairs their freedom of expression and interaction. This is one of the more subtle effects of negative gender bias as the impact of this lack of access has often been largely overlooked. Only in recent years has indicative data been collected which demonstrates that a lack of ICT access and skills has avoidable detrimental effects on the health, wellbeing and prosperity of women and girls.

One of the biggest impacts on lack of progress in ICTs for rural women is a lack of confidence in using ICT beyond a basic use of mobile phones. Many rural women within patriarchal cultures also still see ICT as a male skill area which is not to be encouraged in women. This means that women are not pushing for change, as they do not see it as their right to do so and do not regard knowledge and use of ITCs as a valid part of their cultural role. Education of women and men to help them understand what women have to offer and how ITCs can help them contribute to their communities are desperately needed. With sustained effort learned attitudes and traditional roles for women can be challenged and changed to release women from limiting cultural bonds towards full emancipation.

Another significant barrier to progress is the prohibitive cost of equipment, phones and computers, and the cost of internet data use. For example, 1GB of data (which is a tiny amount of data) can cost as much as 76 per cent of monthly poverty line income<sup>1</sup> in Nigeria. Costs like this are entirely unaffordable for most rural women, particularly women and girls who do un-paid work in the family home or business. The lack of electricity can be a barrier too, as all ICTS require electricity to function and may require a community hub resource to ensure access to all. In regions where women and girls cannot read or write and speak only a local dialect the impact is even more adverse. Without ICTs they have no opportunity to expand their language skills or educations which makes their isolation from the wider global community particularly severe. The lack of ICT access limits their future life choices and economic security and completely inhibits any participation in political and decision making processes.

Political action is the key to change. It is vital that restrictive gender bias in ICT legal, funding and policy are challenged and re-balanced by governments and included in discussions on public ICT provision. This is even more important for rural women because rural regions in general are far less well presented in terms of ICT infrastructure, despite the fact that the costs of the required equipment and technologies have fallen dramatically in recent years. Reducing the costs of access to data are also an urgent issue and may require gender specific dispensations in some cases, such as where women work or farm within the family and receive no money to call their own to spend as they wish.

In developed regions the advantages of the internet, mobile phones and computers have become normalised in society within a very short time. This can happen for rural women too so they can reap the benefits of technological advances and create their own empowerment to be co-creators with men of a more positive future. For example, initiatives such as 'nutritional awareness' mobile phone applications in India and are helping entire communities live healthier lives and the "Buy from Women" mobile phone project by UN Women in Rwanda is helping women access information, finance and buyers out in the fields and in the markets where they work.

It is critical for rural women to keep up with technology to remain connected with the speed of global change, provide a platform to be noticed and heard on the global stage. For individuals it is also essential to be informed of important news such as when rain will arrive and the likelihood of extreme weather which may directly affect their homes and livelihoods.

## **ICT opportunities for rural women**

The urgent implementation of ICT access for rural women is of vital importance for the sustainable development of food security and sustainability for the entire global community. It is estimated that if rural women had equal access to ICTs as men agricultural output would increase four per cent. This would mean up to 150 million less people would go hungry<sup>5</sup>. It is also predicted that if twice as many women had internet access than they do now they have the potential to contribute up to USD 18 billion to the GDP of 144 developing countries<sup>3</sup>. The current impact of rural women cannot be underestimated and their future potential with the benefit if ICTs may literally save the world.

At present global internet availability is immensely uneven with the highest levels of access in developed communities such as 79 per cent of the population having ICT access in North America and 64 per cent across Europe. This is highly commendable, but many of these regions are predominantly urban and do not produce the essential raw foods such as rice, wheat, fruits, vegetables and livestock on which humanity depends for its sustenance. Unfortunately, it is the large rural farming regions which have the lowest levels of internet access such as just 28 per cent of the population having access across Asia and 16 percent across Africa. Both of these regions have large rural populations with rural women remaining at the very bottom of the pile in terms of

internet access. This is both deeply saddening and represents a huge loss of potential for sustainable development for the welfare and enrichment of the lives of millions of women, children and men.

The good news is that there are many ways that ICT can help rural women to work together to help themselves which means that with the introduction of ITC capability improvements can be made quite quickly. Where the resources are available some rural women are already doing this highly effectively and creatively. They are forming local networks for friendship, advice and support, learning new skills, sharing knowledge and working together to implement initiatives and innovations such as selling food together in cooperatives. Women are willing and able to help themselves to the lives and economies of their local communities they just need a helping hand to get started.

As well as the use of mobile phones there are also vast opportunities for positive change with the use of internet services such as internet radio shows giving farming and weather news and vital information sources such as e-health and e-education. These allow women to take control of their livelihoods, health and wellbeing and participate in educational programmes without the need to travel (which may be prohibitively difficult and expensive). Access to e-banking services can make it easier to buy and sell produce and also allows access to support such as micro-financing to enable the start-up of business ventures. It is also easier to research essential business information such as local land rights and permit requirements.

Of equal importance is business knowledge such as how to market and price goods or complete administrative tasks such as tax. Many rural women have traditionally been excluded from the commercial side of things so need to acquire new business skills and knowledge. This type of knowledge can be acquired using e-learning platforms and online forums where questions and answers can be shared. Options such as these enable women to make choices and have control over their futures and their economic prospects.

In political terms the value of women's solidarity cannot be underestimated and can be vastly improved with the capability to communicate using ICTs. The creation of internet resources such as the UN Women partnered iKnowPolitics website<sup>8</sup>, global partnerships to reduce the digital gender gap such as the Equals Global Partnership<sup>9</sup> which brings together service providers and partner including UN Women and social media activity builds the confidence of rural women and increases the power and reach of their views. These tools have an enormous impact on influencing public opinion and increasing pressure on governments and the political will of communities. For example, recent social media exposure on harrowing issues of gender based sexual violence have galvanised worldwide reaction and influenced international debate at levels that governments and politicians simply cannot ignore. The power of solidarity of women and men on critical issues such as violence against women and the promotion of women's political leadership and participation becomes immediate, highly visible and immensely effective in producing concrete solutions and actions. Even though rural women may be geographically remote, it is well documented that online communities help women gain the strength and self-belief to change the status quo, push for the recognition of their human rights and ensure that their views are heard and acted upon.

Ensuring all women have access to ICTs is one of the most important goals in the fight for gender equality due to its impact on so many areas of women's lives and wellbeing. It therefore presents a huge opportunity to leap forward in the journey towards globally gender equality.

## Call to Action

The current global political environment has a regionally uneven mix of hugely encouraging new freedoms and emancipation and startling erosions of women's rights by destructive populist ideologies. Although sometimes challenging, change for women is happening and women have

grown more confident of their rightful status in the world. It is now more essential than ever to remain strong, vocal and striving forward together in solidarity with our global sisters.

At this critical juncture in the women's movement the SIW recommits its focus on continuing to strive for the vision of global gender equality for all women and men and to support all initiatives which aid progress towards this goal. Increasing political prioritisation of women's issues across all regions is an urgent priority for the realisation of positive change. Gender equal and gender sensitive political environments are a universal human right of women and girls and are the foundation of fair and just social democratic governance.

The SIW strongly believes that increasing access and affordability of ICTs for all women, and particularly rural women, will support and encourage participation in political debate and decision making. This will help ensure progress and development on gender equality issues becomes normalised within communities and becomes automatically integral to legal recommendations and policy decisions. The SIW asserts that gender equality issues are ultimately solvable with the harnessing of robust political will and global cooperation for the sustainable benefit of all citizens.

The Socialist International of Women calls all governments, member parties of the Socialist International, as well as NGOs that defend beliefs and values similar to those of SIW, to urgently address the ICT issues of women in their regions, ensuring that ICT access is available and affordable for rural women in particular in recognition of vital role in global food security and sustainability.

SIW calls on all parties to:

*Challenge* all gender discriminatory digital and telecommunications laws and policies which deny women their universal human right of communication.

*Recommend* and actively lobby for funding and initiatives which support the goal of giving rural women access to a minimum of a mobile phone within each community and region.

*Enhance* the integration of rural women in ICTs to include initiatives to improve education, promote literacy and increase healthcare knowledge and support

*Urge* the inclusion of gender sensitive policies and initiatives for rural women within telecommunications policies and digital infrastructures and allocate funding for implementation and development

*Ensure* that service affordability, localised electricity supply and access to ICT equipment such as computers is supported and maintained with initiatives such as rural digital hubs and tele-centres

*Promote* the training and development of rural women in ICT skills and knowledge to increase their confidence and ability to fully benefit from digital capabilities.

*Encourage* the effective participation of women in political processes and ensure the immense value of rural women's contribution is shared and fully appreciated to harness the political will to effect positive change.

## **REFERENCES:**

1. World Wide Web Foundation, Women's Rights Online, 2017 (<https://webfoundation.org/>)
2. Equals Global Partnership (<https://www.equals.org>)
3. Intel, Women and the Web, 2013 (<https://www.intel.com/content/dam/www/public/us/en/documents/pdf/women-and-the-web.pdf>)
4. World Farmers' Organisation – Women in Agriculture (<http://www.wfo-oma.org>)
5. UN Women, The role of women in rural development, food production and poverty eradication. (<http://www.unwomen.org>)
6. The World Bank (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>)
7. e-agriculture (<http://www.e-agriculture.org>)
8. Iknowpolitics (<http://iknowpolitics.org/en/our-network/partners>)
9. Equals (<https://www.equals.org>)



