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PLENARY MEETING

Canada

WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY - INDUSTRY CANADA

Executive summary

The information revolution is real - and likely to accelerate. It is driven both by technology and market forces. The emerging global information infrastructure is tearing down national boundaries and enabling the development of knowledge-based economies under the forces of trade liberalization, competition and global integration. No one knows exactly where it will lead us, but we do know it will be the catalyst for profound economic, social and cultural changes. Preparing for the 21st century will require providing access to opportunity - the opportunity to learn new skills and acquire broader knowledge. In many sectors of society (education, health, etc.) women have a major role to play in introducing information and communications technologies (ICTs). Looking to the future, there will not be enough people to fill the jobs if we are missing the talent pool of women. Women's traditional skills are now widely acknowledged and make women formidable assets and a powerful force in the corporate world. In today's information society and global economy, where "real emphasis" is placed on investing in human capital and increasing competitiveness, the attributes for which women's leadership is praised become key. Supporting the involvement and advancement of women in the information and communications sectors thus becomes essential if women are to make a contribution in the information society. Core institutions such as ITU must work in partnership with Member administrations, Sector Members and other organizations to create opportunities for the development of women in telecommunications and information technologies, and turn opportunity for some into opportunity for all.

Introduction

When individuals are deprived of the opportunity of reaching their full potential, a country is deprived of the opportunity of reaching its full potential.

Preparing citizens of the world for the 21st century requires providing access to opportunity. Equal access to opportunity is a question of fairness, of fundamental social justice. But it is also about the fundamental economic challenge we face. As a society, being prosperous and achieving a higher

standard of living in the new millennium will be anchored in two essential components: the infrastructure of innovation, and the infrastructure of skills and knowledge.

Knowledge is now recognized as being at least as important as physical capital, financial capital and natural resources as a source of economic growth. The challenge with knowledge is to manage it effectively as a society so that it can be used to enhance our overall quality of life. While the transition to a knowledge-based economy (KBE) holds the prospect of improved economic performance, it also brings with it formidable adjustment challenges with implications for firms, individuals, educational institutions and governments. The keys to strong performance in the KBE are successful generation, acquisition, diffusion, and exploitation of knowledge.

The knowledge infrastructure can be seen as comprising those components necessary for the effective creation and transmission of knowledge, including, information systems, communications networks, and investments in human capital such as education, training and apprenticeship.

Participation in the KBE must be ensured through the availability of the knowledge infrastructure to all at affordable prices. Advanced technologies are enabling the use of remote delivery of services such as distance education or telemedicine to ensure that services are maintained in rural and sparsely populated areas and that people with special needs (e.g. the elderly and disabled) will have more possibility to participate in society. To succeed in the KBE, the national communications and information networks must be knitted into a seamless and powerful information infrastructure serving all citizens. Full and open access by service providers and users to networks and the knowledge transmitted over them is necessary to fully realize the economic and social objectives described earlier. Promoting dynamic competition in communications, information and training markets will encourage the private sector to invest and play a leading role in building and developing the knowledge infrastructure and ensure cost-effectiveness, lower prices, and improve and widen service.

In addition to generating unprecedented economic growth in sectors directly involved in providing information and telecommunications services, the knowledge infrastructure will impact on all user industries, for example, sectors such as education, training, health care, commerce, retail, agriculture, natural resources, etc.

Women's contribution to the global knowledge economy

The structural changes underway are profound. The information revolution is real. Society's use of information technology (IT) is growing by 15 to 20 per cent a year. Computers are in everything and yet there is a shortage of skilled people in the information technology field. The small number of women taking up the discipline is one of the most glaring and worrisome trends. Women in computer science programmes in North America today comprise perhaps 15 per cent or less of total enrolment. Disturbingly, female enrolment in computer science and electrical engineering has actually dropped in the past 15 years. And in many other sectors of society (education, health, etc.) women have a major role to play in introducing ICTs. Looking to the future, there will not be enough people to fill the jobs if we are missing the talent pool of women. Women need to be encouraged to develop technical skills and to pursue careers in the technical fields.

Adaptation means innovating on all fronts - not just adopting ICTs, but also the more flexible organizational structures, new management strategies and innovative human resource developments that are needed to make ICTs work.

The KBE requires skills that are broad and highly transferable such as problem solving and the ability to learn. Three sets of employability skills are considered critical by major employers:

- academic skills which provide the basic foundation to get, keep and progress on a job;
- personal management skills which project attitudes and behaviour; and
- teamwork which is needed to work with others.

In an environment where business leaders are indicating that they are experiencing key skill shortages, the question needs to be asked, "Do these skills already exist in the women in their organizations, and what is keeping those organizations from fully utilizing them?"

Women's traditional skills are now widely acknowledged: intuition, communications, team playing and attention to detail. Women also have sharp financial skills and business acumen - not to mention their relentless survival instinct. This makes women formidable assets and a powerful force in the corporate world.

Judy Rosener, a professor at the University of California's Graduate School of Management in Irvine, studied male and female executives with similar jobs, education and ages. Her conclusion, published in *Havard Business Review*, is that women and men manage quite differently. She concluded that men see job performance as a series of transactions - rewards for services rendered or punishment for inadequate performance. They are more "transactional leaders". Women, on the other hand, are known as "transformational leaders", or people that exercise a more "interactive leadership". Women leaders:

- encourage participation;
- share power and information;
- enhance other people's self-worth; and
- get others excited about their work.

Women leaders try to transform people's self-interest into organizational goals. And it has been shown that this leadership style is particularly successful today, for example, with the young professionals who demand to be treated as individuals.

The traditional female value of caring for others - balanced with sufficient objectivity - is the basis of the management skill of supporting and encouraging people and bringing out their best. And women's leadership style is praised not because it's "nice" but because it is a better way to increase productivity and profits. Professional advancement of women is also good business because it puts companies in touch with their markets, organizations in touch with their clients and governments in touch with their stakeholders - the world is not made up solely of white men over 40.

And for women who feel that corporate life is not for them, entrepreneurship is a real and viable alternative which is too often overlooked. In Canada, women are starting businesses at three to four times the rate of men despite the reticence of corporate lenders. With the advent of ICTs, global markets, once the domain of multinational corporations, will become more accessible to smaller companies, remote communities and even individuals. This is a very positive development.

In today's information society and global economy, where "real emphasis" is placed on investing in human capital and increasing competitiveness, the attributes for which women's leadership is praised become key.

Partnering

Supporting the involvement and advancement of women in the information and communications sectors thus becomes essential if women are to be put to contribution in the information society.

In Canada, Canadian Women in Communications (CWC) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to supporting women who want to advance within their own companies, their own industries, or those who want to take advantage of opportunities within other sectors of the converging communications field. With a solid corporate sponsorship base, and through twelve chapters across Canada, CWC offers professional development programmes which ensure that its members (over one thousand) have the opportunity to develop important career skills at an affordable cost. CWC has developed numerous valuable programmes, including a mentoring programme which provide excellent opportunities to share and develop talent and skills within the membership. Scholarships, internships and exchange programmes as well as a job posting service, a database of member profiles, a newsletter, a website, etc. CWC works in partnership with business, government and other organizations to ensure that the leaders of today's communications industry have access to a highly qualified pool of women for hiring and advancement.

CWC has recently developed a partnership with the Global Telecom Women's Network (GTWN). GTWN was established as a formal association at TELECOM 95, in Geneva. GTWN has regional Presidents in Asia, Australia, Europe, the United States, Canada, South America, and, shortly, in Africa. GTWN is a global telecommunications association, headquartered at the International Chamber of Commerce in Cologne, Germany, that is actively involved in developing and promoting the role and interests of women in the telecommunications industry. Organizations like the CWC and GTWN are essential and must be supported. They not only create forums for women to meet other women and share experiences and insights, they also provide an invaluable opportunity to network to gain confidence and encouragement from peers and more senior women in the field.

In a world where strategic alliances and partnerships thrive and become one of the driving forces of the new economy, core institutions such as ITU must work with Member administrations, Sector Members and NGOs to create opportunities for the development of women in telecommunications and information technologies.

Action plan

CAN/88/1

- 1) ITU should increase participation of women in executive positions at its headquarters in Geneva, to help formulate policies, develop programmes and establish linkages and alliances with other organizations involved in the development and promotion of women in communications.

CAN/88/2

- 2) The ITU Strategic Plan should define objectives for the involvement and development of women in all sectors of activities of ITU.

CAN/88/3

- 3) Each Sector of ITU should identify opportunities and projects for women to acquire the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to foster their professional and personal growth so that women are provided with an equal opportunity to participate in the knowledge-based economy of the future.

CAN/88/4

- 4) ITU should act as an enabling force for the development of "network connections" between organizations of women involved in the information and telecommunications field. As such, ITU should promote and support the exchange of experience and expertise between women from different countries, regions and professional background.

CAN/88/5

- 5) Building on the strengths of its membership, ITU should work with its public and private sector members to enable the development of internships and exchange programmes to help women broaden their understanding of the different facets (technical, operational, regulatory, policy, etc.) of the telecommunications sector.

Conclusion

History has taught us that all great technological breakthroughs bring a wealth of unseen opportunities. The information and communications revolution as we enter the new millennium provide the context for opportunity for women in government, politics, business and the global civil society. Clearly the success of this new era depends on striking a balance between technical innovation and social innovation.

It may be hard to actualize change, embrace diversity and concretize equity, but in the end having it all can mean achieving the right balance through social and political leadership. It will not be simple, and it will not happen unless there is sharing between and within many countries, of such leadership.

Making equity and diversity a predominant goal and a fundamental priority will require focus, determination and sustained efforts. It will also require flexibility, openness, understanding and trust. ITU has a crucial role to play as a catalyst to encourage involvement of its Member governments and its Sector Members, and turn opportunity for some into opportunity for all.
