

Distinguished delegates,
Representatives of the private sector, civil society and the UN system,
Colleagues and friends,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this conference which is being held as a parallel event to the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and provide some introductory remarks on the context of the Commission.

The Commission was established by the United Nations Economic and Social Council 61 years ago as the principal inter-governmental body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the empowerment of women worldwide. The Commission meets once a year here at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to evaluate progress, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies on gender equality and empowerment of women and follow-up on their implementation at national level.

In its work, the Commission has given particular attention to the issue of women and information and communication technology (ICT), reflecting the increasing interest by the United Nations in ensuring that ICT becomes a meaningful instrument to empower women and girls throughout the world. In 2003, the Commission adopted recommendations on the access of women to the media and information and communication technologies and the use of media and ICT as an instrument for the empowerment of women..

The attention given by the Commission to women and ICT stems from the realization that, although the potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, social development and political participation had long been recognized, a serious “gender divide” existed which had not been given sufficient attention. This was reflected in the lower number of women and girls accessing and using ICT as compared to men and boys. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men and girls and boys and may even create new forms of inequality. If, however, on the other hand, the gender

dimensions of ICT - in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, education, and employment - are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a very powerful catalyst for the empowerment of women and girls and for the promotion of gender equality.

At its current session, the Commission is considering “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child” as its priority theme. As noted in the Secretary-General’s report submitted to the Commission, despite the existence of an international legal framework and internationally agreed policies aimed at promoting the empowerment of girls, girls in all parts of the world continue to face discrimination and many forms of violence.

Girls continue to be married at a very young age in many countries and have to cut short their education and face the dangers of repeated pregnancies and childbirth which jeopardize their health and well-being. Millions of school-age girls world wide are working in domestic service which can expose them to significant levels of discrimination and violence and constrain their access to education and other opportunities. As many as 55 million girls world wide continue to be left out of formal schooling. The Millennium Development Goal 3 target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 has already been missed. Even where

evenings), security issues and lack of transport. As a result, public ICT facilities have a tendency to become men-only spaces; effectively inhibiting women's and girls' access.

In many parts of the world, there is continuing discrimination in schools relation to access to ICT and opportunities to use ICT effectively. A 2001 study conducted by World Links in four African states – Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal and Uganda – reveals the persistence of gender inequalities in access to ICT. For example, in some schools in Ghana and Uganda, girls do not enjoy equitable access to the computer labs. High student-to-computer ratios and first-come, first-served policies do not favour girls who are typically heavily outnumbered by boys at the secondary level. Girls have earlier curfew hours and domestic responsibilities that limit their access time. The study proposes measures to correct this gender bias including by encouraging schools to