CARIBBEAN WOMEN IN ICT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ICT

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July 28, 2015

Thank you very much, Ms. Samuels.

Distinguished fellow panel members,
Ladies and gentlemen…

Please allow me to thank CANTO for the kind invitation to address this important **panel on the empowerment of Caribbean women in the ICT-sector**. I respectfully say 'kind invitation', but after realizing that I actually am the only female participant at the Ministerial Level of this important conference, I have indeed come to the conclusion, that CANTO's invitation was 'very necessary' as well.

Truth be told, I am a newcomer to the ICT policy sector, as I have assumed the position of Minister of Traffic, Transportation and Urban Planning in Curaçao only two and a half months ago. The good news is that I am a lawyer by profession and have had the honour to serve my country in many positions in the last 20 years, from Minister of Justice to Minister of Economic Affairs and Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles for two terms during the nineties. Afterwards I worked extensively in the private sector, both in Curaçao as well as in the Caribbean region. During this time my path crossed with the ICT sector on several occasions, from our local Telco, UTS, to our Regulatory Agency 'Bureau Telecommunication & Post' as well as regional ventures in Suriname and Jamaica. During my tenure as Minister of Economic Affairs, it was also my honour to develop and pass the first (and so far only) legislation on E-signature and E-zones in my country.

But, ladies and gentlemen, although I think that this suffices as a short introduction on myself, I can also honestly say that encountering no female colleague at this 2015 CANTO conference, is a signal that something is indeed amiss and needs our attention and frank policy discussions in order to change this lacking.

It is therefore my pleasure to dedicate a few words to the very important theme of the empowerment of women in the ICT sector. This matter is not only a challenge for the Caribbean region, but has a truly global character. I will first present a concise outline of recent global agreements on this issue. Subsequently I will illustrate with some examples of what is being done in Curaçao – both within the public and private sectors – in order to promote females (and young females in particular) to actively participate in the ICT sector.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector is rapidly growing, but women are generally under-represented at all levels in this sector, especially in the decision-making positions. Therefore, **ITU Resolution 70** (Rev. Busan, 2014) ***"Gender mainstreaming in ITU and promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women through information and communication technologies"*** recognizes that information and communication technologies are tools through which gender equality in the ICT sector and women's empowerment can be advanced, and are integral to the creation of societies in which both women and men can substantively contribute and participate on *an equal footing*. I will come back to this reference of gender equality at a later moment.

This resolution (70) highlights the role of ICT-s to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in many ways, notably by encouraging girls and women to choose a career in the field of ICTs, and by fostering the use of ICTs for their social and economic empowerment. The resolution encourages ITU Member States and Sector Members to review their policies related to the information society to ensure the inclusion of a gender perspective in all activities.

However, even in more advanced economies, as for example the European Union, it was found in studies that presently only 3 percent of female graduates have a computing or related degree, and only 0.4 percent of these graduates go on to work in ICT-related activities.

In consideration of ITU Resolution 70, the following strategies can be employed to reverse this trend:

1. promoting **ICT-awareness** among girls and women (see par. II);
2. promoting **e-Education and ICT jobs** among girls and women (see par. III);
3. promoting **ICT accessibility** for girls and women (see par. IV) and
4. promoting **digital inclusion** for all (see par. V).

II.   PROMOTING ICT-AWARENESS AMONG GIRLS AND WOMEN

The **International "Girls in ICT" Day**, backed up by the member states of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), is an initiative that **aims to empower and encourage girls and (young) women to consider careers in the growing ICT sector**.

This Day is celebrated annually around the world on the fourth Thursday in April. This year, ''Girls in ICT Day' was celebrated on April 23, 2015. Caribbean governments and relevant institutions have to make scholarships available for selected Caribbean women to attend regional workshops and participate on the remote sessions/webcast provided by ITU. This is an excellent opportunity for attendees to meet other female ICT professionals and learn about relevant study programs and job opportunities in the sector, as well as challenges encountered in their jobs.

III.   PROMOTING e-EDUCATION AND ICT JOBS AMONG GIRLS AND WOMEN

The ICT sector is rapidly growing, thereby creating many new jobs every year. Enabling women to enter ICT-related jobs will provide a boost to the economy. The aim is to provide women with digital skills and education so that their participation in ICT can be increased.

By **encouraging girls and women to participate in digital studies** and **allowing more of them to enter the digital jobs market** we can create a significant boost in the GDP of our economies. According to World Bank calculations, generally every increase in market penetration of 10% leads to 1.4% in GDP growth. Therefore, we have to encourage young women to take up ICT in their day-to-day activities from the youngest possible age and subsequently take up related studies and careers.

IV.   PROMOTING ICT ACCESSIBILITY FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN

Providing accessibility to ICTs for girls and women is key to addressing digital **inclusion** and is a means for **empowering** this group.

Accessibility can make fundamental changes in women's lives. Accessibility to ICT can facilitate opportunities for women that include **exposure to new ideas** and **connections to knowledge previously unavailable**; women's **sense of connection** to their wider communities and their **ability to organize**; **changing narratives, perceptions and stereotypes** through engagement; and **acknowledgement of the reality of these women's lives in their local context**.

It is here that the potential of ICTs' networking ability, exchange of data, information and knowledge, decentralization of voice to individuals (e.g. through blogging), ability to bypass the "mainstream", new media, and many of the other underlying attributes of ICTs and the knowledge society come into play.

V.   PROMOTING DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR ALL

Women play a key role in promoting social and economic development, for themselves, their families and their countries. In this regard it is considered that ICTs are an essential tool for the social and economic development of girls and women. ICTs can provide girls and women **an (e) education and on the job training**, **promote literacy**, **improve access to health care**, and **enable the exercise of legal rights** and **participation in government**. In principle, investing in women has a multiplier effect because women by their nature reinvest in their families and communities.

Accelerating broadband and ICT provision to girls and women will therefore promote gender equality, empowerment and social and economic development of both men and women. The **social** and economic **development** of girls and women can be realized by:

a) creating **local** "**Girls in ICT" websites**;
b) establishing **ICT centres and programs for women empowerment** in the local communities; and
c) **sharing best practices for women in ICT**s on a national, regional and international level.

VI.   THE CURAÇAO EXPERIENCE

Allow me to share with you some of our specific experiences with regard to this topic.

The concept **of promotion of ICT awareness among our youth started some 20 years ago, by the introduction of ICT as an optional subject for youngsters** of 16, 17 or 18 years old writing their final secondary school exam (the level of secondary education determines the number of years in school in my country). ICT education in general – without the option to write a final exam – has been in place even longer for both the primary and secondary schools.

However, an important aspect is that this policy is geared towards the youth in general, boys and girls alike. Our experience is actually that the number of students choosing to write final exams in ICT is limited for both sexes. This could be considered a rather peculiar development in a country which has internet penetration of at least 80% (this is the number for fixed internet access from homes and prior to taking into account the ratio of 1: 1.3 mobile phones per inhabitant).

Curaçao has also implemented a pilot project of One Laptop Per Child in a limited number of schools. An island-wide implementation is currently under consideration.

As we speak, **final preparations are being made at the University of Curaçao to start the first year of the Cisco Academy**. This initiative is based on the worldwide recognized concept of 'Cisco Networking Academies' where learning institutions promote IT skills and a career building programs. This is also geared towards youngsters in general and not specifically gender-based.

A **government funded organization** by the name of **Curaçao Innovation and Technology Institute –'CITI'** (formerly Stimul-IT) has implemented **several programs in recent years with specific focus on females:**

1. A **program for teen mothers**, whom through learning **basic ICT skills** are being re-entered into the education system. This program is 3 years old and has to date catered to **750 girls**;

2. The **local adaptation of the ITU-developed program "Girls in ICT"** (girlsinict.org) by which **girls are taught about programming and engineering in a "non-technical" way.** The local execution of this program has also been on-going for three years and has targeted between **50-80 young girls annually**. Courses are also given in the evenings to accommodate those girls that are too busy with school or work during the day. This program involves many volunteers;

3. A **program called 'FabLab open house',** specifically focused on the experience of 3D printing and other Media and Digital Fabrication Tools;

4. **APPs4Curacao master class** focused in teaching participants the "ins and out" of Location Based Web development;

5. **Master class digital trends for entrepreneurs,** this program was intended to guide entrepreneurs in making the best choice among the growing amount of innovative tools and apps available to promote business;

6. **Safe internet use, this program was especially designed with the youth in mind.**

Also ICT literacy programs have been developed and are available at **different Community Centres,** the **Public Library** as well as **non-governmental organisations**, such as Pro Alpha, a non-profit foundation for alphabetization.

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning that both the **Head of the Computer Emergency Response Team** in Curaçao (the first in the Caribbean) and the **Acting Director of the Regulatory Authority** are women.

Ladies and gentlemen, has Curaçao arrived?

Not in the least, but I must say that Curaçao has made a lot of progress: we have had 5 women prime ministers, Chairman of the parliament, Chief Justice of the court of law and many women in executive jobs in both public and private sector. With a conservative estimate of broadband penetration of 80% and consequently a position in the top 10 of countries worldwide, it is now the responsibility of the Government and indeed of all economic actors in the country to translate this accessibility into GDP growth.

With the continued development of programs such as the ones mentioned before, and many others geared towards the digitalization of mainly government services, we are very much aware of the necessity of consistency, continuity and inclusiveness. In this light specific policies to empower girls, boys, seniors, and indeed every single citizen that would benefit from ICT skills in order to improve their welfare, should be central in our overall development strategy. I call on every person present here today: **don't leave this conference without a personal commitment to do so!**

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