

# Gender and ICTs

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Dramatic changes brought about by information and communication technologies (ICTs) have created new economic and social opportunities the world over. Their use, however, continues to be governed by existing power relations. This issue of *In Brief* looks at the relationship between ICTs and gender equality. Women, particularly poor women, often lack the necessary infrastructure, skills, literacy and knowledge of English to make the most of the opportunities opened up by ICTs. However some individuals and organisations are using ICTs to promote gender equality. The Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) is a women's Internet radio station that uses these technologies to promote exchange between women across the globe. The work of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an example of the capacity-building provided by ICTs which can support and empower women living in remote areas.

## *Challenging gender inequalities in the information society*

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THERE IS AN overwhelming consensus that new information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet have ushered in a new age. References to the "information age" and "information society" conjure up images of a worldwide revolution as if these technologies have a global reach and are relevant to everyone. The truth is that ICTs are not simply technical phenomena, but also have a social character. To fathom the social dimension of ICTs we need to ask some important questions: Who benefits from ICTs? Who is dictating the course of ICTs? Is it possible to harness ICTs to serve larger goals of equality and

justice? Central to these is the issue of gender and women's equal right to access ICTs.

### **Unequal access to ICTs**

Access to new ICTs is still a distant reality for the vast majority of people. The countries of the South, particularly rural populations, have been left out of the information revolution. In many of these countries there is a lack of basic infrastructure, resulting in high costs for installing and running ICTs. Unfamiliarity with ICTs and the dominance of the English language on the Internet, together with a perceived lack of demonstrated benefit from ICTs to address local