

Statement from the Gender Dynamic Coalition – IGF 2009

The Gender Dynamic Coalition is of the view that the IGF is a unique innovation in the global governance arena providing new avenues for deliberative democracy and inclusion. We are of the firm opinion that its mandate should be renewed. However, significant structural improvements are needed for the IGF to fulfil its mandate and the expectations cast on it by WSIS.

Governance arenas are typically caught in masculine practices and women get excluded both in the name of 'expertise', as also by masculine cultures around the debate and discourse. In the IG arena, very questionable beliefs about 'neutrality' of the technology discourse prevail. It is therefore important from a gender equality point of view that special efforts are undertaken for women's inclusion. The IGF, with its emphasis on socio-political inclusion in an arena that has often been cast as a narrow technical subject, is therefore a very important space for gendering IG, which is increasingly having a defining impact on how our societies will evolve. Here it cannot be overemphasised that such inclusion must recognise and privilege the substantive agenda of the constituencies of women from the global south that women's rights advocates have articulated consistently on gender and global justice issues. Needless to say, such a task also requires the secretariat of the IGF to be independent in order for regressive influences on gender justice to be kept at bay.

The IGF was created to move towards global public policies in the Internet arena through open discussion and deliberation on public policy issues and to help shape a new institutional architecture for global Internet policies. Public policy has always been a very important tool to protect women's interests and rights, and therefore the success of the IGF in this role is of paramount importance to gender based outcomes of the IGF. The IGF should therefore be judged on the basis of the contribution it is able to make in helping develop the needed global public policies. The structural improvements required to be made in the IGF should proceed from this imperative.

Such structural improvements can be of the nature of a more focussed work program, with a selection of key topics of urgent importance in terms of global Internet policies, the setting up of formal working groups with defined output requirements for each of them, adequate research and background work on each topic especially from a gender perspective and adequate inter-sessional work. It will perhaps also be necessary that the MAG, which has done excellent work in its present role, goes beyond being a kind of program committee and takes on a more substantial role - both of organising the outputs of the working groups, as well as distilling those of the wider IGF in its annual meeting, and together from there develop some kind of substantive outputs that can be useful for arenas that are supposed to take up a direct public policy role at global and sub-global levels. The IGF should also adequately strengthen its capacity building role and do so particularly with respect to the interests of communities in the global south and their women representatives.

Lastly, though IGF's present format itself gives women a much better chance of participation and having their voices heard in terms of technical and socio-technical issues of IG, the 'formal' openness of the IGF in itself is not enough. More efforts should be made to obtain results on improving substantial participation, including with speaking slots. We appreciate the efforts made towards keeping a good gender balance in the MAG, and attempts towards improving the balance in terms of panelists in workshops, but much more may need to be done on these counts. It is not just important to have the numbers reflect gender based parity but also to have the agenda of the IGF shaped in a manner that is sensitive to and inclusive of a full range of gendered concerns that make explicit women's interests.