

GENDER ACTION LINK:



"The World Bank recognizes that transparency and accountability are of fundamental importance to the development process and to achieving its mission to alleviate poverty. Transparency is essential to building and maintaining public dialogue and increasing public awareness about the Bank's development role and mission. It is also critical for enhancing good governance, accountability, and development effectiveness. Openness promotes engagement with stakeholders, which, in turn, improves the design and implementation of projects and policies, and strengthens development outcomes."

— World Bank Policy on Access to Information, 2010

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) that primarily loan funds to least developed countries have also committed to fight poverty through providing resources, knowledge and capacity building to achieve sustainable development results. Although IFIs are public taxpayer-funded institutions, they frequently fail to disclose project methods, content and other information that impact loan "beneficiaries". Due to international and civil society pressure, IFIs have gradually adopted disclosure policies that aim to increase transparency and accountability of their operations; yet significant shortcomings remain, particularly in regards to gender.

Transparency and access to information have long been recognized as core good governance principles necessary to achieve successful development outcomes. Studies demonstrate that access to information not only enhances stakeholder awareness and "beneficiary" participation in IFI project planning and consultations, but also improves IFI accountability as well as increases the possibility of project sustainability. This might decrease the likelihood of adverse project social and environmental impacts (GTI 2009; BIC and FreedomInfo.org 2005).

Although the majority of IFI disclosure and access to information policies have undergone extensive revisions as a result of civil society pressure and criticism, IFI disclosure policies consistently fail to deepen gender dimensions. Importantly, IFIs neglect to link disclosure and access to information to access barriers facing women described below. Most information regarding IFI policies and projects is disseminated through Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as IFI websites, or bricks and mortar Public Information Centers (PICs) around the world. IFIs have hardly addressed the barriers excluding stakeholders, especially women, in utilizing these services. IFIs must address gender dimensions in disclosure and access to information policies, especially the obstacles facing women, in order to fulfill their promises to provide complete project 'access' and 'disclosure' (GTI 2009; BIC and FreedomInfo.org 2005).

Due to their poverty and marginalized status within low-income countries, women's access to IFI project and policy information is limited by a variety of interconnected barriers:

- ✓ **Mobility & Physical Barriers:** As the majority of poor women are likely to live in rural areas, they are consistently excluded from accessing PIC or ICT facilities, mainly found in urban centers. Safety concerns as well as transport costs also deter women's ICT access and use. Moreover, social norms and cultural behaviors often restrict women's mobility, with some women unable to leave the house without male permission or supervision.
- ✓ **Time Constraints:** Women's triple roles as worker, caregiver and homemaker drastically limit their leisure time. Due to multiple responsibilities, women are less likely than men to have the spare time to fully participate in IFI consultations, including accessing IFI policies, procedures and project information through ICTs and PICs.
- ✓ **Financial Burdens:** Women are less likely than men to have disposable income. Thus, they often cannot afford the financial costs of ICT use and access, including IFI-imposed user fees. Furthermore, women may be more hesitant than men to use family income on ICT access rather than on other household care expenditures.
- ✓ **Lack of Education & Skills:** Women are less likely than men to have completed formal education, resulting in high rates of illiteracy and lack of computer skills. These are persistent barriers in women's access to ICTs and PICs. In addition, often societal attitudes continue to discriminate against women, with an enduring gender bias discouraging girls and women from studying or using ICTs.
- ✓ **Language Barriers:** The dominance of English on IFI websites as well as the lack of IFI information available in local languages restricts women's ICT and PIC use. As IFIs only translate key documents on an infrequent *ad hoc* basis, lack of translation of information inhibits stakeholders', and in particular women's, full participation in IFI consultations.

(Hafkin 2002; Bridge Bulletin 2004)

Since the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights, access to information has been acknowledged by the international community as a fundamental human right essential for democratic governance. However, IFIs fail to fully recognize this unalienable right through inadequate and weak disclosure policies. Although these IFI policies have multiple flaws, perhaps the most shocking is the failure to comprehend the link between disclosure and access to key information. IFI policies neglect to recognize the barriers to access that impacted stakeholders, especially women, face in gathering important IFI project and policy information.

Access to information is a human right, essential for achieving sustainable development, and it is imperative that IFIs "engender" their disclosure policies. As civil society calls for the end of IFI loans and loan repayment requirements that harm poor women and men in least developed countries, civil society must also continue to demand transparency and accountability from IFI institutions. See the 'What Can Be Done?' Box for recommended civil society actions.



Extracts from World Summit on the Information Society Declaration of Principles (2003)

"We reaffirm, as an essential foundation of the Information Society ... that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers.

We are also fully aware that the benefits of the information technology revolution are today unevenly distributed between the developed and developing countries and within societies. We are fully committed to turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and being further marginalized.

We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.

We are resolute to empower the poor, particularly those living in remote, rural and marginalized urban areas, to access information and to use ICTs as a tool to support their efforts to lift themselves out of poverty.

The ability for all to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge is essential in an inclusive Information Society.

Each person should have the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge in order to understand, participate actively in, and benefit fully from, the Information Society and the knowledge economy. Literacy and universal primary education are key factors for building a fully inclusive information society, paying particular attention to the special needs of girls and women."

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- Civil society must pressure IFIs to include gender dimensions in IFI access to information and disclosure policies. Project and policy information should be made accessible in diverse forms for all those affected by IFI investments.
- Civil society must insist that IFI disclosure frameworks routinely include translation of key documents and policies into local languages.
- Gender justice and other civil society groups must pressure IFIs to work with national governments to adopt clear gender-sensitive and culturally specific ICT strategies for the provision of equitable access to IFI project and policy information.
- IFIs operations must address the gender digital divide.
- Civil society should continue to demand that IFIs recognize and address the link between disclosure and economic, political and social barriers of access to information.

POSSIBLE PARTNERS!

- Bank Information Center (Global) www.bicusa.org
- CEDHA (Argentina) www.cedha.org.ar/
- FreedomInfo.org (Global) www.freedominfo.org
- FUNDAR (Mexico) www.fundar.org.mx
- Gender Action (Global) www.genderaction.org
- Global Transparency Initiative (Global) www.ifitransparency.org
- Women of Uganda Network (Uganda) www.wougnnet.org
- The Access Initiative (Philippines) www.accessinitiative.org/

ACTION RESOURCES:

- ['Transparency' at the Bank Information Center](#): Provides an overview of transparency issues at each IFI as well as updates, key concerns and resources.
- [International Women's Tribune Centre](#): Has a large program dedicated to the relationship of women, ICT use and economic empowerment.
- [WIGSTAT- Women, Technology and Society](#): Presents a good collection of papers and resources about gender and the information society.
- [WSIS Gender Caucus](#): Provides a good overview of key issues and case examples regarding women and ICT.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS & DECLARATIONS:

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948](#)
- [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966](#)
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966](#)
- [WSIS Plan of Action, 2003](#)
- [WSIS Declaration of Principles, 2003](#)

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