

Regional and National Context

by Kristina Mihalec

Conventional wisdom on the so called “North/South” digital divide create a false dichotomy because it usually excludes perspectives of women in Central Eastern European (CEE) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Although geographically it can be referred to as the North, economically and socially it is not. This region is virtually uncharted territory in relation to women and ICTs. The discourse on the “North/South” digital divide usually leaves out entire regions that do not fit the model of the South or North. This issue was touched upon during the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Gender Caucus session held in Geneva on December 2003. A WSIS panel discussion entitled, ‘From Bucharest to Tunis’ discussed gender and ICTs in Eastern Europe and CIS countries.¹ It was noted that this region is not a unified and recognized force in the international scene regarding women and ICTs. During this panel on December 11th, women panellist spoke of how the region of South Eastern Europe and CIS are “lost countries,” as Ms. Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, Regional Adviser on Gender and Economy put it. Central Eastern Europe and CIS countries do not fall into the traditionally established geographical categories of the “North/South” digital divide either by the international community or by donors. During one of WSIS’ Gender Caucus panel, Osnat Lubrani, UNIFEM Regional Programme Director for Central and Eastern Europe, also recognized the special need to establish an e-Equality Fund: *“The idea is to initiate this Fund that would push forward gender mainstreaming in everything what we are doing in this Summit. ICTs have big potential to bring positive change”*. (Dokmanovic 2003: 1)

1 One of the first international meetings where the CEE and CIS region was gathered together to discuss women and ICTs. The need to bring the region into the ICT discourse on an international level was discussed as well as international understanding on the region is needed. Not all “poor” countries are the same, solutions and examples from other “poor” regions may not apply to the CEE and CIS region.

It may often be misleading as to which conference individuals in the CEE and CIS, that deal with ICTs and women or with civil society, can attend, which call for papers to apply to, what donors to approach, and what is applicable to them when terms such as the North/South digital divide is used. The end result is a low rate of participation in events and resources, which also leads to limited information and isolation to some extent. Most often, the few women in the CEE or CIS who work with gender and ICTs on the national levels are occasionally included in ICT meetings that include North America and Europe. However, their experiences are so different that it leads to frustration and misunderstanding. Several years ago, as one Eastern European participant in an ICT North America and European symposium put it, "I am the only one here from the region. I have no idea what they [women from Western Europe and North America] are talking about and they have no idea what I am talking about. Sometimes I think we're from two different planets."² For some reason there seems to be a special relationship between the North and South that allows issues on the digital divide or gender gap to be explored. However, there are only a very few forums that attempt to bridge the Western/Eastern European digital divide.³

Traditionally, the terminology of using the "North/South" paradigm predates the digital divide. The "North/South" divide seems to be easy shorthand for colonial models, or a distinction between rich, cold-weather countries as compared to less affluent, warmer countries. There are some countries from the CEE and CIS with basic industrial infrastructures that have trouble feeding their populations or upholding basic human rights, much less offering accessible Internet connections.⁴ Yet these countries of CEE and CIS are omitted from many discussions on the North/South digital divide because it is unclear what and who is being discussed.⁵

Perhaps new categories or terms need to transcend North/South colonial, World War II, poor vs. rich models to describe the digital divide. We can expand the terminology to include the North/South/East/West divide among "developed," "developing," and "overdeveloped" nations. But such classifications still follow the classical models of the "have" (being the

2 Private conversation, 2000.

3 The organization European North American Women Action (ENAWA), for example, looks at the digital divide in Europe. See <http://www.enawa.org>

4 E-mail conversations with Penney Kome, WomenSpace, October 2003

5 Although some discourse and literature on the digital divide exist, when the CEE and CIS region is referred to it is usually by unreliable international sources on infrastructure, which lacks a gender perspective and local content or cooperation.

“North”) and “have-nots” (being the South) which ignores the distribution of wealth and resources in areas within “developed,” “overdeveloped,” and “developing” nations. Many post war or countries in transition in the CEE and CIS, due to monopolies, corruption, lack governmental initiatives, (gender desegregated) ICT statistics, etc. results in a chaotic and inappropriate situations that prevent the use of ICTs or effective development of infrastructure.

Defining just the term ‘digital divide’ without using the terminology of North/South still leads to fundamental confusion. The definition was discussed during the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR)⁶ and the International Communication Association (ICA)⁷ Symposium on Digital Divide, in 2001. From the papers presented it became apparent that different interpretations existed of what the digital divide actually is. An abstract of various methods and definitions about the global and local digital divide were summarized.

There were other obvious differences between papers in the smaller set concerned with the “global digital divide” when contrasted with the larger set of “local digital divide” papers:

- Scale: Global versus local. The “global digital divide” looks at the digital divide between countries. The “local digital divide” tended to look at the digital divide within specific communities, cities, regions, or countries.
- Methodological orientation. Have more of an observational tone, emphasizing interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and local surveys that kept the focus at the level of individual people and enabled a variety of insights about why people may decide not to use digital resources.
- Practical orientation. Focus on simply understanding why access to the Internet is still unequal in countries where Internet access is fairly common. Immediate and long term solutions to that unequal access were explicit in only a few papers in this group. Research on the global digital divide, by contrast, most often consider how one might reduce the gap between the haves and have nots.
- Technology and problem bias. Research on the global divide were more likely to see the digital divide as a real problem for which there may be real technological, socioeconomic, and infrastructure solutions. Some participants on the local digital divide were uncomfortable with referring to the gap in access as a “digital divide”. The preference was to relabel the digital divide as a digital continuum,

to question whether the digital divide was really a problem, and to focus on psycho-social solutions. (Foulger 2001: 1)

Much of the discourse on the digital divide is based on economy and infrastructure. However, where to add countries with a (post) socialist/communist background when speaking about the digital divide in relation to economy or infrastructure creates confusion? This is especially confusing as many countries have some form of infrastructure but for various reasons cannot or do not use ICTs.

Lack of Data

Even if various indicators are used, other than infrastructure, to determine the gaps in the digital divide, national statistics and research is needed in order to participate in the Information Society dialogue. State statistical data is necessary to make proper policies and, although tricky, make international country comparisons. Statistical data can pinpoint weak areas and obstacles that need to be overcome. Without statistics, proper governmental and local initiatives may not be so effective. Statistics will also affect to what extent issues will be brought to light in the international context. The fact that there is a lack of statistical data is a setback when attempting to discuss or participate in the international discourse of the online gender gap or digital divide.

During the WSIS Gender Caucus panel in 2003, Angela Me presented the research findings of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) that was also prepared for the WSIS Eurostat Statistical Workshop.⁸ Me stressed the importance of having proper data before developing actions. The collection of ICT statistics based on the Eurostat model became a priority with the adoption of the first 2002 E-Europe Action Plan, an economic initiative making ICTs the main force of growth in the European Union. Data collection was needed to facilitate and benchmark implementation of this plan. (Me 2003: 5)

The latest research, *"Statistics on Women and Men and ICT: the ECE Region,"* by Me and Sicat reveal the lack of official statistics in most Eastern Central European and CIS countries. Me states, "gender and ICT in 42

6 See IAMCR <http://www.iamcr.net>

7 See ICA <http://www.icahdq.org>

8 For a list of WSIS documents on the workshop, 'Monitoring the Information Society: Data, Measurement and Methods,' see <http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2003.12.wsis.htm>

ECE countries has shown lack of data for gender analysis in countries such as CIS and the Balkans, and lack of awareness on gender issues.” (Dokmanovic 2003: 1). Many countries do not have sex-desegregated ICT statistics or ICT statistics in general. (See table 1). Of the countries that do not have any ICT statistics or sex-desegregated ICT statistics in 2003 are: Bulgaria, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, FYR of Macedonia, Serbia & Montenegro, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. (Me and Sicat 2003: 18). In fact, it should be mentioned that many of these countries very rarely incorporate sex-desegregated, or women centred, data in official statistics in any area of research (e.g. lack official state statistics on domestic violence).

TABLE 1: Official Collection of ICT Statistics by UNECE Member States in 2003 ⁹ (see on the next page)

9 Me and Sicat note that their table only includes received responses from countries. Countries that did not reply were not included, whereas countries that replied as having no statistics were naturally included. In other words, no response is not equated with a negative reply (e.g. no ICT statistics). From personal discussion during the WSIS conference in Geneva, Angela Me also related her regret at the lack of statistics from the Balkan region, as this thereby excludes perspectives in the International discourse on ICTs and hinders the development of formulating “global” perspectives and policies, among other things.

TABLE 1

Country	No ICT Statistics	ICT statistics (non-sex disaggregated data)	ICT Sex-disaggregated Data Statistics
European Union			
Austria			
Denmark			
Finland			X
France			X
Germany			X
Greece		X	
Ireland		X	
Italy			X
Luxembourg			X
Netherlands			X
Portugal			X
Spain		X	
UK			X
Acceding & Candidate Countries			
Bulgaria	X		
Cyprus			X
Czech Republic			X
Estonia		X	
Hungary		X	
Latvia		X	
Lithuania			X
Poland		X	
Romania		X	
Slovenia	X		
Balkan Countries			
Albania	X		
Croatia	X		
FYR of Macedonia	X		
Serbia & Montenegro	X		
CIS Countries			
Armenia		X	
Belarus	X		
Georgia	X		
Kazakhstan	X		
Kyrgyzstan		X	
Republic of Moldova	X		
Russian Federation	X		
Turkmenistan	X		
Ukraine			X
Uzbekistan	X		
Other Countries			
Canada			X
Iceland			X
Israel			X
Norway			X
Switzerland			X

In Croatia, a few commercial agencies provide information on the use of ICTs for customers who pay for them, so the demand for this kind of information exists. Unfortunately, this kind of information is not open to the public; it is unclear for what purpose the data is collected, methods used to gather the data are not transparent or internationally applicable. The capacity and methodology to compile statistics in the regions varies from country to country. When official or commercial statistics are not compiled according to scientific methods and internationally recognized standards of classifications the data can be misleading and ambiguous. In a joint document by UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat,¹⁰ the paper states that *The Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics* “approved by the United Nations in 1994 offer a good foundation on which statistical organizations through the world can build their activity.” (UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat 19 September 2003: 2) Official ICT quantitative and qualitative statistical data can be used to create, plan, improve, and evaluate the effectiveness of certain target areas that were set out in the WSIS Draft Declaration in 2003¹¹ :

- 1) Information and communication infrastructure
- 2) Access to information and knowledge
- 3) The role of governments, the business sectors and civil society in the promotion of ICTs for development
- 4) Capacity building: human resources development, education and training
- 5) Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
- 6) Enabling environments
- 7) Promotion of development-oriented ICT-applications for all
- 8) Cultural identity and linguistic diversity, local content and media development
- 9) Ethical dimensions of the Information Society
- 10) International and regional co-operation (UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROSTAT 22 September 2003: 3)

10 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and Statistical Office of the European Communities (EUROStat), presented this paper at the 2003 World Summit on Information Society statistical workshop entitled, ‘Monitoring the information Society: Data, Measurement and Methods.’

11 Paper presented at the 2003 World Summit on Information Society statistical workshop entitled, ‘Monitoring the information Society: Data, Measurement and Methods.’

Nonetheless, organizations and institutions can provide valuable ICT data that is not based on Eurostat models as alternative to National Statistic Offices (NSO). In some cases this may even be desirable if the NSO's do not follow – or have – recognized international statistical standard and base their methodology and interpretations to fit private or political interprets.

Including a gender component into statistical data would not only be useful to women but also to men. By tracking and eventually evaluating the “different” ways ICTs are used and the effects they have on the lives of women and men appropriate adjustments can be made to the benefit of society in general.

“The availability of sex-disaggregated ICT data is a needed support to facilitate gender sensitive policy making in ICT. Data collection of ICT in general is still in an initial phase world wide, and the integration of gender component in the national data process early on is crucial for building foundations on which to ensure that women and men today and in the future will have a full share of optimal access, use and benefits from ICTs” (Me and Sicat 2003: 1)

For countries in transition, at the stage of establishing new policies and regulations, it is crucial to take advantage of the opportunity to collect gender-desegregated data in all areas before final governmental initiatives and decisions on ICTs are made.

Indicators

When comparing national statistical data on an international level, attention should be paid to how and what regions are being compared. Since there is a lack of data from most of the Central Eastern European countries, the statistics are representative of all of Europe. Often the data that is compiled to represent Europe fails to mention what European countries have been included in the study. Representation of all Central Eastern European countries into the statistical collected data of “Europe” would slightly alter the statistics and at least show that a digital divide exists not only between North and South, but also between West and East.

For example, according to the International Telecommunications report of 2001, 144.4 million Europeans had used the Internet at least once a month. However, while Germany, Great Britain, Italy and France jointly represent 63% of all online European users, the percentage increases when

other countries such as Spain and Netherlands are included (ITU March 2001). A percentage of online use by a few CEE countries included in the ITU research is so small that it would not significantly influence the overall statistic on Europe as a region. This often leads to mistaken assumptions that: a) all European countries have been included; and b) that there is an ICT uniformity and online use across all of Europe, which is not the case.

The indicators or evaluation techniques, of the North/South dichotomy usually focus on infrastructure and economy within a region. Traditionally, infrastructure has been considered as the main challenge to improving the use of ICTs. Existing indicators of measurement are often infrastructure based, measuring such variables as the number of main telephone lines (ITU 2003: 3) Recently, the gender component has brought to light a gender gap within the digital divide that needs to be addressed. "The collection and analysis of information on the different impact of ICT on men and women is a necessary prerequisite to the achievement of a globally equitable Information Society."

(UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat 22 September 2003: 2) There are other factors such as gender, bureaucracy, affordability, ICT knowledge, telecommunication monopolies, lack of national policies and signed international treaties that would affect online use and access, even if some form of telecommunication infrastructure exists.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA, 1997) provides a useful definition of gender-sensitive indicators that can be applied to ICTs.

"Gender sensitive indicators have the special function of pointing out gender related changes over time. Their usefulness lies in their ability to point to changes in the status and roles of women and men over time and therefore to measure whether gender equality is being achieved. Because use of indicators and other relevant evaluation techniques will lead to better understanding of how results can be achieved, using gender-sensitive indicators will also feed into more effective future planning and program delivery."

(UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat 22 September 2003: 3)

Online access does not always translate into use, because much of what needs to be changed relies on power structures that affect women's participation in the Information Society. Collecting sex-desegregated ICT statistics is one step towards developing a foundation on which to lobby with. By using gender-sensitive indications we get a glimpse of potentially being able to identify socio-cultural situations that limit women's opportunities

and achievements with ICTs. Combining national statistics, sex- desegregated data, and gender-sensitive indicators gives us a more realistic perspective on the different aspects of women's lives.

Example Indicator: Free Time and Employment

The scarcity of sex-desegregated data on the Information Society reflects the general absence of information on women's activities across all sectors. This has "led to a lack of understanding of the 'different worlds men and women live in' – in terms of access to education and work, health, personal security and leisure time." (United Nations 1996: xvii, quoted in UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat 22 September 2003: 2). Are new technologies increasing women's work or does it provide them with more leisure time. Perhaps, in this case, it is more relevant to ask if women have personal free time to explore new technologies if they are available. This may be a difficult task when women, living in a "traditional" culture, are often responsible for the vast majority of household duties in addition to child care and their duties in the workplace. Leisure time is an important element that can allow women who are interested and have access to explore new skills and familiarity with ICTs, but leisure time is something often missing for women in Croatia.

One gender-sensitive indicator, and there are many, should look at the free time as a essential prerequisite that can contribute to personal growth, creative expressions, and developing private interests. This raises issues of women's economic status and culturally established models that place family obligations as a priority. From countless discussions with women, when asked why they do not use the Internet to its potential, the common answer is lack of free time. Free time not only enables women to use ICTs but also provides space where women are free to "play" and thus learn and explore new skills through practice and trial and error. As Alesia Montgomery from the University of California states: "To answer these questions, we must pay attention to how online use emerges in everyday life. And to understand everyday life, we must consider the relations among paid labour, free time and online use." (Montgomery 1999: 98). A common story women in Croatia relate are difficulties to learn new skills if it not related to their paid work. For some women using a computer, if she has one at home, always comes after she has come home from work and finished all the household and family chores.

As Vesna Benak states in the book's section on interviews:

“So, a young highly educated woman, is financially dependent, and therefore can’t pursue her intellectual and cultural interests. If she is employed, the cost of living are so high that an investment in computers and communication technology seems to be a luxury, or at best, you have to put money aside for a long time or go in debt. Lack of time is also an important factor, as well as legalized monopoly in the sphere of telecommunications, because of which we have to pay astronomical sums for phone bills...This all brings us back to finances. On the other hand, I know several colleagues who had to keep quiet about their education and knowledge about using new technologies in order to avoid troubles in the workplace...Some of them have to read and print e-mails for their bosses, who don’t know how to do it themselves.”

When working at home or on several “paid” jobs there is little time to explore and learn what the Internet can provide. There are few possibilities for women to learn through “play.” “Play” is an important factor in developing new skills; it is free uninterrupted time where one can explore new facets of basic to advanced computer language and techniques. Generally, because of the “traditional” society, more men than women in Croatia have leisure time to learn through play. However, there are some women who have taught themselves ICT skills, in their leisure time or because it was a necessary part of their employment. Most of the ways women learn are through ICT initiatives,¹² play through leisure time where the level of knowledge may progress, or through self taught methods. In the capital city, there are several courses teaching ICT skills, however the fees are high, they are offered at various ad hoc times, and the quality and methods used to teach are sometimes questionable. In other cities, not to mention towns next to no courses on ICTs exist.

“I have been trying to learn on my own at home and have asked friends (male ones, on purpose!) to help me. There is no training available in Istria, neither free nor otherwise, to say nothing about training for women :-))” Porec, Croatia

“Where I live very few people have computers at home, and since unemployment is high, they are unable to use it at work. Unfortunately, the people who do have computers at home mostly use them

12 Such as ENAWA and Women’s Information Technology Transfer (WiTT) for CEE and CIS.

to play games, which is due to both ignorance and lack of interest.”
Beli Manastir, Croatia

Since women have a general lack of access to most resources, it is important that we look at the how the paid labour force, leisure time, as well as structures that can influence their use of ICTs. However, when looking at women’s use and gathering data on it, it should be noted that there are a multitude of indicators or reasons that determine the scope of women’s Internet use. As a joint report at WSIS by UN bodies at an workshop states:

“No single indicator can capture the gender equity issues of the Information Society. Limiting data to female/male differentials in use of the Internet gives a very limited picture of the Information Society. Among the questions it leaves unanswered are: What are the relative difficulties that women have in accessing the internet? Once connected is there accessible content in terms of language, literacy and interest to women of the world...” (UNECE/UNCTAD/UIS/ITU/OECD/EUROStat 22 September 2003:11)

ZaMirNET (means for peace) is a non governmental organization that was established in Croatia during the homeland war. They use and work with ICTs as a tool to provide and create information needed for the development of civil society. In the scope of using ICTs to improve communities, they developed a challenging job search project under their program, “Revitalization of the War Affected Areas of Croatia Using ICTs.” (APC WNSP 2003) Recently ZaMirNET began to evaluate the impact their project had on women, not just on the level of skills development but also measuring behaviour changes in women who participated.¹³

The project aims to increase the potential for employment among youth, women, and war veterans by using ICTs to search for jobs. One out of their four focus municipalities, Kistanje, is an area that was considered underdeveloped even before the war in Croatia. Out of 3,038 people, 90% are unemployed, and 46 women have permanent jobs (2001 Consensus in APC WNSP 2003: 52). ZaMirNET recognized that personal, cultural and social constraints (such as family obligations and gender roles) can be a deciding factor when seeking employment or deciding to participate in their job search project. For example, middle-aged participants felt less support from

13 ZaMirNet is one of the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) project testers for the Association for Progressive Communications Women’s Networking and Support Programme.

their social environment and some women reported problems in their families related to their absence from the home during their participation in the job search workshops. Despite certain obstacles the project continued by providing an interactive, open, safe and non judgmental environment when discussing the potentials ICT use for employment.¹⁴ Through group discussions and familiarization with ICTs, women began to feel less isolated and more confident. One participant found a job opening on the Internet and feels proud for applying even if she does not get the job (APC WNSP 2003: 55). As one woman describes her change in attitude:

“I am raising two kids by cooking for the construction workers but now after I have heard all of you that you see me as an entrepreneur, that you think I can run a family farm with village tourism, I see that I am really a survivor, ready to adapt to new situations. But I still have this sense of fear in me; will I be able to do it?” (APC WNSP 2003: 57)

Providing an environment where women can discuss and encourage each other is an important element in the development of a project. Teaching the ‘soft-hearted’ approach for creative strategies (Austerlic 1999: 71) is being done and used by women’s organizations in Croatia, however they still need basic technical skills in order to make strategies with each other.

Incorporating the two components of technical skills and communication strategies is an important component of a few ICT projects. One such ICT project, Women’s Information Technology Transfer (WiTT), is the first regional women’s initiative that aims to provide and exchange ICT skills among women activists in CEE and CIS countries. Women’s organizations require ICT skills to effectively address the issues their activism entails. This is vital both for the countries themselves, and for peace and security in the region. Whether it be online conference registration, downloading PDF documents, or creating e-petitions for example, women’s organizations need to have ICT skills in order to function normally, and these skills are sometimes lacking. The WiTT training and support program provides culturally relevant and gender sensitive ICT training in local languages to women

14 From discussion with Danijela Babic from ZaMirNET on 28 February 2004, she explained that the GEM results need to be continually reassessed as the project develops, the evaluation process is an ongoing process. Although the job search process is helping women and men find jobs, Babic is beginning to notice the jobs women and men search and apply for may still be based on traditional gender models of labour division. Further analysis and re-evaluation of the project’s impacts is being done.

in CEE countries.¹⁵ Osnat Lubin, UNIFEM's Regional Programme Director for CEE summarises:

“It is important to have women included into the development programs at the local level, developing local contents on their local languages, on the issues that interest local women.” (Dokmanovic: 1)

Despite certain obstacles that the project can not address, such as the countries' lack of telecommunications infrastructure, WiTT will aim to provide what 97% of what women in the CEE and CIS feel is missing and needed: ICT training for women. The process of how WiTT develops is as important as the project itself and takes into consideration the background of the women and their various women's activist work. Trust building is the corner stone of creating a culture of communication, without trust there is little to communicate. Women have agreed that WiTT will develop in an inclusive and transparent manner, where we share ideas, inspiration, and experience. In this way, we can ensure the building of a new and improved culture of communication based on trust.

For ICTs to be used to its potential, it is necessary to gather data, such as national ICT statistics. This can provide useful information for national governments and local initiatives, as well as to serve as a foundation for lobbying on an international or national level. Through research and use of gender-sensitive indicators, we can better understand the “different” lives of women and men in the region, thereby identifying the inequalities and providing effective strategies for change.

15 Women's Information Technology Transfer (WiTT) began developments in 2003 as the first regional project on women and ICTs in cooperation with ENAWA and International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV). WiTT is currently looking for donor support in order to make this unique project sustainable for the future. For inquiries contact: kristina@witt-project.net