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ICT4D BRIEFINGS

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Gender and ICTs – still a long way to go...

The launch of [*EQUALS: The Global Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age*](#) by the ITU and UN Women in September 2016 is to be welcomed. However, it highlights that much still remains to be done at the interface between technology and gender, despite all of the efforts made over the last two decades. There are four key areas where further action is necessary.

First, the word “gender” is all too often equated simply with “women”, and ignores the diversity of genders encapsulated in the acronym LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning). Indeed, whilst women are frequently marginalised through ICTs, the challenges faced by gay and lesbian people are often equally bad, as witnessed by the [hacking to death of gay activists](#) who used online media in Bangladesh in 2015 and 2016. Using “gender” rather than “women” for initiatives that explicitly focus on women also seems to devalue the very important work that still needs to be done to enable and empower women to use ICTs safely and productively.

Second, we are dismayed that the [harassment of women at international ICT events](#) still remains commonplace, as exemplified by recent high profile incidents. Undoubtedly, this is in part related to the male domination of the ICT sector more generally, which is itself something that the [EQUALS](#) initiative seeks to address. However, such male behaviour is unacceptable, and conference organisers need to address it unequivocally. We call upon all conference organisers who have not already done so to put in place clear guidelines on expected behaviours and actions taken should they be broken. The Geek Feminism Wiki has an excellent [conference anti-harassment policy](#) template that could serve as a model for organisers to build on.

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“Our own ongoing research in Pakistan has highlighted the very extensive amount of sexual harassment using mobile devices there. Whilst women suffer most from such harassment, men too are harassed. ... Most worryingly, our survey shows that 40% of respondents think that when women are sexually harassed through their mobile devices, they are usually or sometimes to blame for it.”



Third, there is good evidence that online sexual harassment is much more widespread than is often thought, particularly in the conservative societies of North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia (see the BBC’s recent stories on [sex, honour and blackmail in an online world](#)). Our own ongoing qualitative and quantitative research in Pakistan has highlighted the very extensive amount of sexual harassment using mobile devices there. Whilst women suffer most from such harassment, men too are harassed. Preliminary results from our online survey suggest that although social media are used for harassment, most often it occurs through calls and text messages. The implications of posting images on social media have recently been highlighted by the apparent [honour killing of Pakistani model Qandeel Baloch](#), but this is just the tip of an iceberg, with many women in Pakistan, and indeed elsewhere, living in fear of retribution should family members see imagery that others may have posted. Most worryingly, our survey shows that 40% of respondents think that when women are sexually harassed through their mobile devices, they are usually or sometimes to blame for it.

Finally, we argue that men need to become much more involved in challenging the unacceptable ICT related behaviours of other men. Initiatives led by women for women have not yet made the necessary inroads into changing male behaviour, although they have often provided valuable advice about safe online behaviour for women and support for those who have been abused online. Multimedia resources can be used very effectively to share advice and information online, and men should be encouraged to stand up and complain publicly when they witness unacceptable behaviour (see [HeForShe](#)). Likewise, there is a growing movement for men not to participate in conference panels or sessions in which women are not also involved.

Very much more needs to be done, though, if women and men are to benefit equally from the appropriate use of ICTs. This is an agenda that requires urgent attention, and it is something that everyone involved in ICT4D can, and should, act upon. The UNESCO Chair in ICT4D is partnering actively on gender and ICTs with the ITU, UN Women, and The World Economic Forum, especially through the [EQUALS](#) initiative. Members featured prominently in the gender and [child helpline](#) sessions at [ITU Telecom World](#) in Bangkok in November 2016, and the Chair was also a partner of the ITU’s parallel academic [Kaleidoscope](#) conference.

