

Email? Let's make that femail...

By [Márcia Detoni](#)

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Recent research conducted in North America and Europe suggests that from an early age girls are socialised in a way that discourages them from participating in so-called “masculine sectors” and that means we’re betraying the heritage Ada Lovelace left us.

The digital divide has a female face! And that statement comes with a warning that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are only helping to perpetuate existing gender-based inequalities – and it is not just a matter of connectivity and access to information. “The problem is that women are not getting engaged with technology,” says Chat Garcia Ramilo of the Women's Networking Support Programme, a non-governmental group.

In the knowledge society, ICTs are seen as key to economic, cultural and social development. They are rapidly reshaping the world of work and commerce, learning and governance, and interactions between different sectors and groups in society. They represent a huge, new and important area for employment and economic opportunities.

But activists who took part in the Tunis World Summit on the Information Society late in 2005 say ICTs are entirely dominated by men. “Women have been left out,” says Magaly Pazello, a Brazilian gender specialist.

Under-represented

Women are clearly under-represented in ICTs in most countries. A study conducted in 2003 in Costa Rica shows that women make up 60 per cent of the country's university students. However, when it comes to technological subjects only 22 per cent of students are women.

In the workplace the picture is worse: only one in 10 workers in the ICT industry is a woman – and there too they are mostly secretaries, cashiers and data entry workers (only 7 per cent of ICT company owners are women).

“That is not technology,” says Kemly Camacho from Bellanet.

Even in Australia – a far wealthier nation than Costa Rica – women account for no more than 16 per cent of workers in the ICT industry.

According to women's groups, the absence of women in the ICT industry is worrying because it is helping men race ahead of women — thus contributing to the economic inequality between the sexes.

Success at Tunis? Perhaps...

The women's movement say there should be more women in decision-making positions and in programming and web design jobs. After sustained lobbying in WSIS meetings, activists did managed to get the Tunis draft declaration to acknowledge the need to build ICT capacity and confidence among women.

It is not a binding commitment, but Brazil's Magaly Pazello says world leaders have signed up to an international document, and that women's groups around the world will campaign to get the declaration implemented by national governments.

Experts are divided on the causes of the gender gap in ICTs. Some point to research that suggests biological factors: while men tend to be better at mathematical and spatial reasoning, women are ahead in multi-tasking and creative problem-solving.

On the other hand *Maitland + 20*, a book that was launched at Tunis and charts progress since the Geneva WSIS, quotes recent research conducted in North America and Europe which suggests that the way in which girls are socialised from an early age discourages them from participating in a "masculine sector like science and technology".

"Whether these differences are culturally imposed or immutably biological is less certain," says a UN report on Information and Communication Technologies and Women.

"Nevertheless the greatest barrier is the lack of knowledge about the different types of ICT jobs. Women should be aware of the diversity of roles in ICT: computer programming, business analysis, project management, web design and marketing."

Amid the heated gender debate at Tunis one fact is rarely mentioned. The inventor of computer programming was a woman — a 19th century British mathematician by the name of Ada Lovelace. But the credit for the landmark invention was taken by her friend and mentor Charles Babbage.

Typical!

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