Women in the new information society

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Ahead of the first ever World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in December 2003, the committee adopted the own-initiative report by Anna KARAMANOU (PES, GR) on women in the new information society. It began by pointing out that, although the information society and access to information and communication technologies (ICT) were widely considered to be "gender neutral", this perception was misleading as studies and data in fact showed a persistent gender imbalance - to the detriment of women - in ICT-related education and jobs. In most European countries less than 20% of students in the ICT sector were female and there were even fewer women setting up their own businesses or being given positions of responsibility in this important sector. This trend was particularly disappointing given that the ICT sector had accounted for 60% of new job opportunities during the past 5 years. If the Lisbon objectives of creating a dynamic, knowledge-based society and increasing the employment rate were to be achieved, women needed to be fully involved at all levels in the information society, including policy-making and management of the ICT sector. The Commission and the Member States were therefore urged to pay particular attention to women at risk of being excluded from the benefits of the information society, such as older women, unemployed and low-income women, migrant women, women from ethnic minorities and women with disabilities, in order to prevent the emergence of a "two-speed society". The Commission was also asked to collect systematic data on structural differences in the ICT sector broken down by gender. The committee suggested a number of ways in which women could be helped to participate in the information society: - the Structural Funds and in particular the Social Fund should be used to finance training in ICT with a special emphasis on entry or return to the job market for unemployed women; - the Member States should encourage the inclusion of ICT into primary schooling from an early age, thus giving girls a more natural relationship to ICT and counteracting the gender-stereotyped attitude to ICT which may occur in later life; - school, university and vocational guidance services should take a more proactive approach to encouraging the participation of girls in technical and technological fields, including vocational training systems outside the school education system such as ICT apprenticeships; - access to ICT must be affordable. MEPs also urged the Commission to ensure that Community financial assistance for the new EU Member States, both pre- and post-accession, gave higher priority to ICT education and training programmes for unemployed women in order to increase their chances on the labour market. Lastly, the Commission was urged to promote ICT-related programmes in developing countries enabling women to take part in shaping the new economy and society. Together with industry, the Commission should study ways in which ICT technology and products could be made widely available in developing countries, as cheaply as possible, to avoid a growing divide between those who can afford to purchase expensive technology and the masses who cannot.