WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD AND INFORMATION LITERACY
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Good afternoon. I am Joan Challinor, Chairperson of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. I welcome this opportunity to speak to you about a subject close to my heart and one that I think may have been slighted by this conference: women in the developing world and information literacy.

Jackman and Jones in their fine paper written for this conference state the situation boldly "the economic and social gains from globalization have not been equitably distributed…" Who, then, has been left out? Many in the developing world: the poor (predominately women); the unschooled (predominately women); and the illiterate (predominately women) have been overlooked. I want to talk with you today about these women. Without a discussion of how information literacy should impact, elevate and enhance the lives of women, we are selling our concept short.

Let me give you an example: Woody Horton in his fine paper identifies an "informed citizenry" as a critical factor for a "stable democracy." Yet women are 50% of all voters in all countries. And let us ask, how many women are "informed" in the sense Horton means? Soledad Ferreiro suggests that "government policy-makers must highlight the importance of information literacy as a basic human right." I ask: if women are to enjoy this basic human right, who is looking out for their ability to read even the simplest written document? Yes, I know there are many attempts to improve women's literacy in the developing world, but I ask, how does our conference add to these efforts?

Wilson Aiyepeku is helpful on this point. He writes of our conference's bias toward "digital literacy" and "Internet Age skills." I agree with him, even to the

extent of suggesting that "aural information literacy" might be, at a future time, a subject of such a conference as ours. Radio is well recognized in many parts of the developing world as the cheapest, most effective way to reach those millions of women whose digital competence lies far in the future. I think we have to agree that, for the moment, information literacy does imply a digitally competent workforce, a business thrust and a highly educated workforce. Where these sociological conditions exist then we have a chance to get "information literacy" in gear.

Yet there is another view. I ally myself with Elsa Ramirez who writes so well about the "continuing aggravation of the problem of the divide between the 'information haves' and the 'information have-nots.' " She has identified "cultural modernization" as crucial to the subject we are discussing, and she is right. All these concepts: digital literacy, information literacy, and basic literacy swim like fish in a cultural ocean. We must look to these oceans, examine them, and know their ebbs and flows if we are to make all our literacy efforts effective.

Social conditions matter. Let me talk about the cultural ocean of the developing world and the subject of women and information. We must begin to think that in the developing world women's present place in the information revolution is so problematic, so egregious, and so deplorable that we must, at last, make a <u>meaningful</u> effort to put it right. I know, as you know, that there has been in the past few years, an extraordinary effort to understand and become sensitive to women and their needs in the developing world. It is now past time to accept an "information literacy super-highway" on which men in the developed world, and some in the developing world, are traveling in fast cars while the vast majority of women in the developing world are walking barefoot on dirt roads.

The expression "information is power" is now accepted. And we agree, at last, that women have an essential role in sustainable human development. But, I ask, how have these twin realizations interacted? Why have women been forgotten

in the powerful information world at the very moment that they are recognized as all-important? I suggest that for many in the developed world these two ideas spin, endlessly separated, like planets, never really touching, never striking each other to produce the sparks, which ignite actions. It is, more than ever, important to explore the ways in which the information revolution and the empowerment of women may be brought together.

Three fundamental convictions inspire my talk today:

1)   Women must first be literate before they can be part of the world of information literacy.

2)   Women in the developed and developing world must be part of the discussion. They should be involved in every stage of gathering and disseminating information and should determine what information is to be collected, and how and in what form it is to be shared.

3)   All information gathered by worldwide organizations should include complete data on women, and this information should be disseminated in a form that is accessible and useable to women in every geographic and demographic setting.

First: Why do women in the developing world need full and unrestricted access to information? Just one example: women and the law. These women cannot benefit from laws of which they are unaware, laws which would help them in the workplace, in getting and keeping property, and in voting for officials who would serve them in their governments. Most importantly, they need the ability to see that laws already on the books are truly enforced. Health information is another need: without basic health information and the ability to use it, women cannot take charge of their own

lives. They will not know how to limit the number of children they will bear and, hence, they will forever face life as third-class citizens. Health literacy may be a desideratum for us; for most women in the developing world it is a matter of life and death for themselves and for their children. The paper by Ms. Kickbusch, Ms. Caldwell and Ms. Hartwig is eloquent on this subject.

Second: Why should women be involved in gathering and disseminating information? Just consider how little of the information in today's world pertains to women's lives in the developing world. If asked, and if we listened, they will tell us what information would be most useful to them and in what form they wish to receive it. Information should not just travel on a one-way ticket, from the developed world to the developing nations; it should also travel in reverse. These women should be encouraged to collect <u>their</u> information: indigenous art, stories, folk medicine, oral histories, religious culture—indigenous knowledge of all kinds that has been previously disregarded by the "information world." Again, see the Kickbusch, Caldwell and Hartwig paper. The listening has hardly begun. Yet not to involve women from the developing world in the discussion, fully and completely, will be carrying on a one-way conversation. The bitter end of colonialism should have taught us how useless and how harmful are one-way conversations. Have we, in the developed world, learned, <u>really</u> <u>learned</u> our lesson? The jury is still out.

Third: Why is data on women in the developing world important and why must they have better access to it? Women in the developing world raise the children, do much of the back-breaking daily work, farm, weave the cloth, negotiate for food and labor, and much, much else. But much of the world's information has to do with "men's work." Further, this information is most often disseminated throughout cities, and this is as true of the developing world as it is of the developed world. People in rural areas—especially women—come up very short if they receive any information at all.

In the United States, 99% of the public libraries are now connected to the Internet. But women in the developing world, especially those in the rural sections, cannot walk to a library because there are no libraries. If women are to assert their rightful place in the world's evolving social, intellectual, political and economic systems, we of the developed world must work to see that women, all women, have access to and use of the world's gigantic, and still growing, information base. We must also consider that networking—made so easy by access to the Internet—between women of all countries and diverse backgrounds, could generate valuable insights and engender confidence in their own ability to cope with their lives in a swiftly changing world.

Again, "Information," as we are often told, "is power." Less often do we follow that statement with a discussion of "the responsibilities of gathering and disseminating information." What, then, I ask today is our responsibility toward the women of the developing world—those women who often labor beyond endurance for their families? For too long we have congratulated ourselves on our information know-how without investigating our responsibilities with the same intensity. We must somehow extend the present very valuable discussion of information literacy to include in the distant future information literacy for all women in all countries of every socio-economic condition.

I suggest that we have a great responsibility to make access to information and information literacy a part of "women's empowerment." That women in the developing world must be empowered should be obvious to us all. But just how we go about this task is not as clear. What I do know is that bringing the world of information to these women and giving them a chance to contribute to it is a part of the answer.

NCLIS's mandate is, in part, "to appraise the adequacies and deficiencies of current library and information resources." This mandate does not stop at the water's edge. We of NCLIS are, therefore, concerned now, and in the future, with women's access to information and information literacy in the developing world as well as in the developed part of the globe. The three organizations here today, UNESCO, NCLIS and the National Forum on Information Literacy, are in powerful positions to help ensure that women in the developing world will have input in, and access to, all the information presently at the fingertips of the developed world. Until we understand the many oceans in which basic literacy and information literacy swim, our task is only half finished. I am sure, like me, you wish to see our task well finished. Phillip Candy's quotation from the 68 Digital Opportunities Taskforce is deeply meaningful: "to help the poorest help themselves to create richer and fuller lives that express and affirm their own distinctiveness in an increasingly interconnected global village." These are the women I have been talking about. Thank you.