



# Networking for Change

## The APCWNSP's First 8 Years



Women in Sync | Toolkit for Electronic Networking

# **Women in Sync**

A TOOLKIT FOR ELECTRONIC NETWORKING



## **NETWORKING FOR CHANGE** **The APCWNSP's First 8 Years**

Association for Progressive Communications  
Women's Networking Support Programme

2000



# NETWORKING FOR CHANGE

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*“Far greater numbers of women are now using new communication technologies in their work, but the issues identified five years ago still remain to be critical for most women in the world. Majority of the world’s women still do not have access to a telephone line, let alone a computer or the skills and knowledge to exploit the new technologies and to make these work for her. But in addition to these, we now have to contend with new issues and challenges.”*

*Networking for Change*  
The APCWNSP's First 8 Years

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# *Foreword*

Last May 2000, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) celebrated 10 years of building a global Internet community for environment, human rights, development and peace. A significant part of this celebration is the Women's Networking Support Programme (WNSP), one of APC's most successful and dynamic programme. APCWNSP began in the early 1990's and continues to be one of the strongest global Internet-based networks in the world.

As we approach our own 10th anniversary, we are publishing *Women in Sync*, a collection of stories about the experiences of women and their organisations who have become part of the APCWNSP network. *Women in Sync* is designed to be a toolkit for women's electronic networking.

This three part toolkit is a reflection of lessons we have learned as a network and an acknowledgement of the challenges we face in a world increasingly transformed by information and communication technologies. We offer our experience in the hope that it will provide women inspiration and an opportunity for learning to create and maintain strong Internet-based networks.

*Women in Sync* is a major component of APCWNSP's latest project called Lessons Learned: Building Strong Internet-based Women's Networks. This project is a global research, documentation and training effort to create resources and tools that will enable women's organisations as well as ICT project planners to implement successful women's networking initiatives. This publication is a contribution to the development and strengthening of practical, relevant and sustainable women's networking initiatives at the global, regional and national levels.

All the articles in *Women in Sync* were written from the perspective of women who pioneered in e-mail communications in the days before the Internet boom. The articles also tell the stories of women who persevered in utilising computer networking that built connections among women across continents for women's empowerment.

The first kit, *Putting Beijing Online*, is a summary of findings of the research, Women Working in Information and Communication Technologies (WWICT):



Experiences from the APC Women's Networking Support Programme. This research study was developed to gather feedback from the team of 40 women who had worked on the APC communications project in Beijing during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The WWICT study builds on findings from a previous WNSP study done in 1996 on women's global networking. It explores in more depth women's relationship to and experience of working with computer communication technologies. The two studies highlight the concrete experiences and achievements of diverse women working in information and communication technologies and offer a useful corrective to conventional views of women and technology.

The second kit, *Networking for Change*, is a collection of five articles that chronicles the history and examines the growth of the APCWNSP from a small group of women to a global network that served as an incubator of networking initiatives worldwide. The articles in this series focus on lessons learned, emerging issues and challenges in gender and ICT policy and advocacy, integration of new and old technologies to strengthen women's networking, directions in ICT training for women, and the WomenAction global information and communications initiative for the five-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The third kit, *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally*, are stories of women's networking from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. From APC Africa Women comes the stories of the Francophone African Website Famafrigue, the national information network Women'sNet of South Africa and an example of electronic commerce for the African women entrepreneurs. An example of regional information and resource sharing is presented through the article about the Asian Women's Resource Exchange, a network of 11 organisations from nine countries in Asia. The APCWNSP in Latin America is featured in another article that traces its history as a network that first provided user support and technical training for women's organisations, later building a reputation as a resource in the strategic use of ICT from a gender perspective. Our last story is about the Network of East-West Women which connected women's centres in East and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union in the fall of 1994 and has grown into a well-known network providing linkages and information resources for women in that region.

In the last five years, many more women's electronic networks have been formed to put ICT to work for women's advocacies. By publishing *Women in*



*Sync*, APCWNSP hopes to encourage the telling of many other women's stories.

We would like to thank the International Development Research Center (IDRC) for their support for this publication. IDRC has been a partner of APCWNSP through the years.

We hope that the stories in these pages resonate in your own context, and that the lessons we have distilled from our experience help all of us in carving the next 10 years of women's electronic networking.

Chat Garcia Ramilo  
Lessons Learned Project Manager  
APCWNSP  
November 2000

# *The APCWNSP* Pioneering Women's Electronic Networking

*Karen Banks*

*"We are not afraid anymore of witch-hunts and the curses that rain down on feminists. If being powerful and knowledgeable is being a witch, then let every woman be a witch."*<sup>1</sup>

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Women's Networking Support Programme began in the early 1990's and is still one of the strongest women's Internet-based networks in the world.<sup>2</sup>

As we approach our 10th anniversary, we both celebrate the achievements and acknowledge the challenges the Programme has experienced. We offer our experience in the hope that it will provide inspiration and an opportunity for sober reflection on the factors which contribute to creating and maintaining strong Internet-based women's networks.

## THE STORY

**'... go and find out about this 'e-mail' thing'!**

So rang the words of my director in June 1991. Having just returned from a conference in the North of England, he was terribly excited about an experimental means of communicating via computer and telephone. A way of communicating that was more durable than fax, cheaper than the telephone, able to transmit information in a format that could be re-produced over, and over again.

In my quest to discover more about this technology, I found my way to Graham Lane, the Information Technology officer of Amnesty International and author of *Communications For Progress* — at the time, a ground-breaking exploration of NGO (Non Governmental Organisation) and activist use of



computer-based communications. Graham introduced me to Mike Jensen at GreenNet, one of the first ISPs (Internet Service Providers) in the UK founded in 1986.<sup>3</sup>

Mike was experimenting with the exchange of information between two computers using a telephone line as conduit. Messages were composed using special 'DOS'-based software ('FIDONET'). They were then packed up in a bundle which was compressed to about 1/20th of its original size. A telephone call was made from one computer to another via a modem. The bundle was then sent down the telephone line — much as logs might flow along a river — to a destination, many thousands of miles away.

Soon after, a communications 'hub' was established at GreenNet which exchanged e-mail, via daily telephone connections, to over 40 communications hubs in Africa, South East Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe. The communications hub in London was called 'GnFido' (GreenNetFido).

The heady combination of communication and computer-based technology intrigued me completely, and within six months, I had become the 'system operator' of the GreenNet-Fido gateway. I was a 'techie' and I was hooked.

### **The Association for Progressive Communications (1990)**

Between 1982 and 1987 several other independent, national, non-profit computer networks emerged as viable information and communication resources for activists and NGOs. The networks were founded by people with experience in communication and international collaboration in the NGO world, and a deep commitment to making new communication techniques available to movements working for social change.

In 1987, GreenNet began collaborating with counterparts at the Institute for Global Communications (IGC) (then known as PeaceNet/EcoNet) in the United States.<sup>4</sup> We started sharing electronic 'conferences' or 'newsgroup' material and demonstrated that transnational electronic communications could serve international as well as domestic communities working for peace, human rights and the environment.

This innovation proved so successful that by late 1989, networks in Sweden (NordNet), Canada (Web)<sup>5</sup>, Brazil (IBASE), Nicaragua (Nicarao)<sup>6</sup> and Aus-



tralia (Pegasus) were exchanging information with each other and with IGC and GreenNet.

In the spring of 1990, these seven organisations founded the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) to coordinate the operation and development of this emerging global network of networks.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Earth Summit and the Women's Networking Bureau (1992)**

In 1991, GreenNet was working with over 800 NGOs in the UK and Europe. These NGOs worked mainly in the areas of environment, development and human rights. Many of these NGOs were preparing for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development — or as it was more popularly referred to — The Earth Summit.

In June 1992, staff of APC members (including GreenNet) formed a team to provide for the first time, on-site computer-based communication services to the 17,500 NGO delegates who attended the parallel NGO forum during the Earth Summit. The impact of the service was notable in many respects and was the first of APC's on-site services at the series of UN World conferences. Today, these services are often provided by the United Nations directly, often in partnership with NGO Networks such as APC. We have come to expect such services at important regional and international events. But at the time, the Earth Summit's NGO Communication Centre felt like something from the future.

APC had made a network-wide commitment to respond to the needs of the NGO community attending the UN Conference on the Environment and Development. It focused most of its energies worldwide toward serving one community (albeit a large and diverse one) for the first time.

Learning from this experience, a group of women who were based at various APC member-organisations identified the need to serve the international women's environment and development movement in a similar, but more coordinated manner.

Alas, the path was not so smooth, the obstacles to preventing women's appropriation of this powerful technology were many. Even some of our col-



leagues failed to grasp the imperative we understood: that women would be marginalised further if denied access to fully exploring and appropriating this technology. We had difficulty explaining to donors how critical it was for them to support this area of work. We had difficulty gaining permission from management to allocate time to this work. We had difficulty explaining to people, just what it was we actually did!<sup>8</sup> Questions and concerns were raised by women's groups about the technology and the impact on women's lives. They were understandably reticent, wary, even suspicious.

The findings of our research in 1996 reflect some of the concerns women expressed during this time:

"Although more positive examples of online experiences were cited than negative ones, the latter reinforce the many challenges women face in the adoption of communication technologies and help to clarify some of the pitfalls associated with its use.

"Some negative experiences cited by the respondents include: limited accessibility, time consuming, information overload, language constraints, lack of privacy and security, potential fear of backlash or harassment, inappropriate use of information, skill deficiencies, lack of gender-sensitive training and support, and alienation.

"Women from the South, in particular, shared many negative experiences such as those associated with the limitations of an e-mail only account (not having access to remote databases or Internet tools), limited infrastructure (difficulty in getting a phone line), and the high costs of data transmission (networks in the South often charge their users for all messages, both sent and received).

"Clearly, when making decisions about the usefulness of computer communication technologies, women need to consider both the negative and positive experiences carefully." [APC Women's Networking Survey, 1997 <http://community.web.net/apcwomen>]

These barriers still exist for many women today.



### **Early encounters: women's groups take the lead (1993)**

By this time, APC's membership had expanded and relationships had been built with partners in South East Asia, Africa and Central and Eastern Europe. Over 20 women staff and colleagues of APC member and partner networks worked continually to raise awareness and gather support for an international women's networking support programme. The work was not always prioritised or considered core to the work of the APC member. Some women had a very supportive APC member network base, others were not as fortunate. In either case, predictably, women worked overtime or in their 'spare' time, however it could be managed.

These women were technicians, information workers, project managers, financial workers, coordinators, and executive directors from over 15 countries who have decided to work together online through an electronic newsgroup called *apc.women*. Collectively, they had all the skills and expertise needed to begin working towards a shared vision of a strong Internet-based women's network.

Despite insufficient financial and/or management support, women in APC continued to explore ways to share their expertise and experience; their technical know-how; and their skills with information dissemination and discussion facilitation with women's organisations in their local communities.

One example is the work of LANETA, the APC member in Mexico, with one of their community members *ModemMujer*, a women's media

*Mujer and Mujer — Labortech*  
(extract from *apc.women*)  
by Beatriz Cavazos, *ModemMujer*  
Dec. 1992

"We are excited about the possibilities that electronic linking holds for the exchange of vital information, analysis and experiences throughout the Central and North American region and the Caribbean in this period of economic integration.

"We are sorry that we cannot be with you today. As is the case for most folks, electronic networking is one part of a much broader overall strategy, in which we are working to promote transnational networking that is strongly rooted in local organising, primarily the efforts of grass-roots women.

"At present we are in the midst of a training project which is leading to a working group composed of women from community, labour and Christian organisations in central Mexico. We have been sharing and analysing our own personal and organisational experiences to grasp the elements of this new economic model, based on structural adjustment, new labour relations and free trade. We are seeking to identify the new contradictions, demands and models of organising which will be most effective in this period of history we are now entering.

"Computer networking is an integral part of this analysis and training process. So far, participants have taken their first steps.

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and information advocacy group. ModemMujer used e-mail to pledge their support to a Women and Labour conference they were unable to attend, while squarely placing Information Technology in its appropriate context.

Another example is the work of ECONews Africa, a development media advocacy group based in Nairobi, Kenya. Working through the APC partner in Nairobi (ELCI), ECONews Africa sent information from the African regional preparatory meeting for UNWCW to the apc.women newsgroup. This was the first time information from an African UN regional conference had been sent to regional and international support networks using electronic mail. ECONews Africa used electronic networking tools as an integral part of their approach to media and communication. The initiative was also led and staffed by women.

On the other side of the world, the International Women's Tribune Centre in the United States produced its first edition of 'Computer NewsNotes'. This was the first regular hard copy bulletin written for women activists focusing on 'Women, Computers and Technology'.

Concurrently, members of the South East Asian Women's Information Network (SEAWIN) were conducting a needs assessment survey of their members. They asked members about their use of electronic networking, their opinions and reservations about using electronic networking and their visions for appropriating the technology.

Convinced by the work of these and other women's groups using APC networks, some donors began to actively support women's electronic networking initiatives. Interestingly, they were also often 'activist' donors who explicitly funded women focused projects. Although the financial support was often quite small, the moral and institutional support were generous and a critical factor in building the capacity of the early pioneering groups.

There were other factors that contributed to the emergence of the APC Women's Networking Support Programme. At the time of the founding of the Programme, many grass-roots organisations and movements had become increasingly aware of the potentials of the new communication technologies. The prevailing discourse at that time centred on how the so-called information superhighway could allow not only access to education and knowledge for all, but also democratise information and provide a tool for empowerment and development. (Sally Burch)



Two events which further strengthened the case for a global networking support program for women were the Vienna Human Rights Conference in May 1993, and the Interdoc-Aspac Workshop in Kuala Lumpur in June 1993.

The two events were quite different. The Vienna Conference was a United Nations World Conference attended by tens and thousands of delegates all over the world. The Kuala Lumpur meeting was a technical skills share and policy development workshop attended by 55 people. Both, however, were catalysing events for the emergence of WNSP.

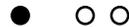
At the Human Rights conference, women representatives of APC met with UNWCW NGO Facilitating Committee members, and ideas were developed for a broad-based communication and information strategy for the Fourth World Conference on Women.

During the Interdoc-Aspac workshop in Kuala Lumpur, an intervention was made which would further strengthen the case for a women's networking support programme.<sup>9</sup>

In the months following the Vienna Conference and Kuala Lumpur Workshop, women working at APC members and partners had their hands full strengthening connections made and following-up on possible new connections. The connections traversed geographical and political divides, as the APC women networked among themselves, with activist women's media groups who used APC services, and with UN agency people who could help facilitate the birthing of a women's programme. In addition, women staff of APC members and partners pro-actively and

We were surprised at the sense of empowerment which resulted. For the women from the colonias populares, computer familiarity meant the demystification of a world which has imposed even further marginalisation upon them. The bank and telephone unionists were using computers every day but had been denied access to any training beyond data entry!

"In the next step of this process, these women will be identifying their counterparts in North and Central America, entering into processes of communication and exchange. We are hoping that computer networking can be a part of that. Already we have had two powerful experiences this year. Just as we were beginning to study structural adjustment, jagdish (hello!) sent us a letter from women in India which analysed the very issues faced in Mexico."



"...And give us more rain, health for our cows, plenty of food and new technology..." prays a Maasai elder at a meeting called by three rural-based communities in East Africa to discuss progress made in establishing resource centres and fm radio stations.

Voices from Ngorongoro  
by Mercy Wambui  
Econews Africa, 1997

"The Maasai people in Tanzania are losing their land. In some areas their pastures are given away to commercial

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quite consciously engaged their male colleagues in discussions about how to ensure women's inclusions in activities, projects, and networks (such as Interdoc-Aspac). The role that male colleagues played in the early days of the Programme can not be under estimated. As a network committed to social justice, APC needed to know that its own house was 'in order' so to speak. It is a process and discourse that continue to this day. Acknowledging the gender bias inherent in the design, production, use, and control of ICTs has been a critical factor in the development of constructive relationships with male as well as female colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in September 1993, the APC Council approved the 'Women's Networking Support Programme' and a coordinating committee was formed.

## BUILDING THE NETWORK

### The women

Before looking at some examples of national and regional networks, it is worth spending some time learning more about the women who led these initiatives. An in-depth analysis of this is covered in more detail in the *Putting Beijing Online* (Toolkit 1). Nonetheless, it is important to understand in a general way, some of the personal circumstances and contexts that have drawn women to the Programme.

What work were the women doing? Were they 'techies', were they in management, support workers at small ISPs, journalists, women's rights activists, website builders, information specialists, media practitioners, researchers, activists? What was their experience of working with technology? Were they part of an organisation, or were they independent ICT workers and consultants? What were their socio-economic, political, ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds? What was their educational background? Were they literate in English? Were they bi-tri-lingual? Were they mothers or grandmothers? Were they looking for a support network or mechanism? Were they looking for training? Did they just 'stumble' across the Programme?

I did not touch a computer until I was 27, and that first experience was through my work as a 'temp' in London during the late 1980's. 'Temp' is a



nickname for someone who registers with an agency and is available for doing all and any kind of secretarial, administrative, clerical, nursing, accounting work (these are just a few examples). I believed in my ability to 'self-teach' and took a chance that no one would realise that I didn't have a clue what I was doing when I was sent to my first 'temping' assignment. I was not afraid of computers and was quite honestly intrigued and seduced by them.

I suppose I followed a 'science' as opposed to an 'arts' stream in my education, meaning, I studied chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics. But this ended abruptly after first year in the university when I decided to leave and join a band as a keyboard player. I am also an activist, committed to spending my life working to bring about social change in whatever way I can.

All of the women who are drawn to the Programme are activists. Both on a personal and political level, these women work, through actions (be it awareness raising, training, lobbying, campaigning, organising workshops, writing, etc.) to highlight the injustices people (and in most cases, women specifically) face and the struggles they wage towards redressing these injustices. Many members work in areas such as human rights, women's health and reproductive rights, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women's economic empowerment, etc.

They are more often than not working with women's groups in their local communities and therefore provide an important function as 'bridges' or 'brokers' between local and national, local and regional, local and international support networks and fora.

In general, they are engaged with information and technology as tools for their work.

farming enterprises, in others they are pushed out by development projects, mining, tourism or concerns not easily heard by planners, policy makers and donors.

"EcoNews Africa used APC networks to highlight the plight of a Maasai community threatened with eviction by a General Management Plan written for the community by the Ngorongoro Conservation Area Authority under the technical advice of IUCN.

"Through APC 'conferences' (newsgroups) and the EcoNews Africa World Wide Web, the Maasai were able to express their lack of participation in the whole process, their fears and what they proposed to do.

"The story drew a lot of attention, especially donors and others who started asking questions, and a public debate began on the issue. The Maasai, on learning of the attention to their situation expressed that they were happy to be part of a larger global community that was watching, concerned and taking action." ▀



Another important 'characteristic' is the combination of working with the technology, and a questioning and need to analyse the legal and policy frameworks which regulate the production, distribution and use of the technology.

More comprehensive personal profiles of some of the women who worked in the Beijing team are included in Toolkit 1 of this series. But it is interesting to look at a few of the words of women, as they describe themselves to us.

- ▶ "I am a journalist and was able to apply my journalistic skills in my work with APC."
- ▶ "My background is in information and articulating social networks."
- ▶ "I would consider myself an 'all-round' moderately skilled technician with a lot of experience working on a day-to-day level with an Internet Service Provider."
- ▶ "I am mainly an editor and also do program work related to the application of telematics (community radio broadcasting and e-mail training) in three rural communities."
- ▶ "I am/was an excellent promoter for electronic communications for women's organisations, speak Spanish and English and had been training women in this new technology for four years... I had user support skills at the software use level. I had experience in popular education methodology and worked at incorporating that in computer training, as well as knowledge of gender differences and theory and how different approaches for women's training might be more useful than a boring classroom style."
- ▶ "I am responsible for managing the centre's database. I designed the database... I'm also a facilitator of an e-mail forum which serves as a venue for women's issues and concerns in the Asia region."
- ▶ "I organised and facilitated four regional and various personal trainings for women's NGOs on using Internet resources and e-mail, in particular."
- ▶ "Experienced journalist, speaker and panelist on all aspects of electronic networking, politics of the Internet (gender, North-South, language, policy, public access, freedom of communications), new media and human rights, etc."



Who do the members represent?

This has always been an interesting question for the Programme, but without doubt, one of the major strengths of the Programme has been its open approach to diverse types of membership. Members of the Programme may be representatives of a women's organisation, such as ModemMujer in Mexico); or a women's media network, such as FemNet in Kenya, or ALAI in Ecuador. They may also be staff of a women's Internet-based network, such as Women'sNet in South Africa; of APC or APC members and partner, such as the APC Executive Director Anriette Esterhuysen and Fundraiser Maureen James or Laneta Support Manager Erika Smith. Some members are also women representing themselves as ICT and media gender advocates, such as Pi Villanueva, Maja Van Der Velden and Karin Delgado.

The culture of the Programme emphasises the importance of respecting the particular needs and circumstances of every individual member. Women are free to represent themselves, their organisations, their networks and all are treated equally and with the same respect.

### **A safe and secure space**

In a world where micro-seconds measure human accomplishments, where micro-chips store unbelievable amounts of highly complex technical information, where computer processors perform calculations at speeds that rise daily and geometrically, one of the factors which contributes to strong network building is time. Careful attention to time.

The two years in the run-up to Beijing were spent strengthening and linking existing women's networks through a long, slow, solid process of trust and relationship building.

Women work at a certain pace, their life patterns ebb and flow to a certain rhythm, their commitments are many and varied, their free time almost non-existent, their choices often restricted, their needs well defined. Women commit to work that is important for them, will make a difference in their lives, will help them to achieve their goals. Any programme or project which aims to support the empowerment of women must acknowledge the reality of women's lives and adapt and respond accordingly.



The Programme is not project-driven. Obviously, financial support is crucial for the sustenance of the network allowing for staff to be fully recompensed, for activities to be implemented, for the capacity of the network to be strengthened. But funding is not always available, and fund raising is hard.

What is interesting about the WNSP is that it has survived, and thrived during times when there have been little or no funding. The reasons for this are very much related to the less visible aspects of the Programme, those concerned with the 'human' side of the work; the mentoring, the support, the solidarity and the fact that the Programme tries to be relevant and therefore, a part of women's lives. Another of the less visible aspects of the Programme, and more difficult to 'quantify' is the way women build networks.

If we were to look at one or two of the most important factors which contribute to the unique way of doing things of the WNSP, it is this human aspect. Remembering that most of our work is done online, in a fairly stressful and manic environment, how in practice might we see this "unique way" being put into action?

This nurturing and supportive environment is undeniably important for women who are just starting out in the world of Internet-based networks, especially at national and regional level. Having a response to that first e-mail message from someone who understands your fears and concerns, is a very comforting initiation to the world of ICTs.

### **'Women-Led' and Women Only Space**

Another important aspect of this supportive environment has been the practice of providing a 'women only' work space and insisting that women take up all leadership positions. We call this practice being 'women-led'.

The electronic planning spaces of the Programme are almost without exception, women only. There are exceptions to this practice at national and regional level, but in these situations, the men who participate are allies who understand the importance of, on the one hand, providing support and sharing knowledge and skills; and on the other hand, respecting the 'women-led' philosophy of the Programme, the unique ways women work and the spaces that they provide for one another.



In the early nineties, many male colleagues provided technical, moral and other types of support. In some cases, male colleagues were identified as focal points in countries or even regions, where relationships had not been developed with women or women's groups.

'System operators' of small ISPs (often APC members and partners) were often the first conduits who facilitated the introductions between female staff at their organisation and women's groups in their localities on the one hand, and the coordinating committee of the WNSP on the other hand. Men such as Charles Musisi (Mukla, Uganda), Lishan Adam (Padis, Ethiopia), Moussa Fall (ENDA, Senegal), Jagdish Parikh (Interdoc-Aspac), Roberto Verzola (E-mail Centre, Phil-

### **Staying in touch**

- providing regular support to women ICT workers who may be experiencing difficulties in their place of work, or in their personal lives, with management, with male colleagues, with female colleagues
- providing regular e-mail support and mentoring to project managers, regional and national focal points

### **Skills share and exchange**

- sharing knowledge concerning ICT management or 'housekeeping', for example, instructions for cleaning viruses, best software to use, remote login support for technical maintenance of servers, best compression tools, online translation tools, web searching tips, etc.

### **Developing ideas and proposals**

Most of our reference documents and policy documents are developed through a voluntary workgroup system. An online working group will 'spin off' from the main online workspace. Members who are interested and have the time will volunteer to spend time developing draft policy statements or proposals. These drafts would then be taken back to the international workshop for final consultation, revision and publication.

### **Inclusivity and accessibility**

- providing information in accessible formats, for example, ensuring that all documents are available in text only formats
- trying to ensure translation of important materials into at the very least - French and Spanish, and incorporating translation line items in all funding proposals
- making connections with other media to encourage the widest possible dissemination of information, for example, by collaborating with radio, video and other media networks.

### **'Being there'**

Probably the most important. Working with ICTs can be a very difficult, lonely and often isolating experience. Women are often working from home or alone in their workplace. They are often looking after their children or caring for family members. In some respects this may suit their lifestyle, but it can also mean that they feel quite alone in their work. If a woman has a difficult work problem, be it technical or other, women are always ready to listen and try to respond and support one another. ▀



ippines and Interdoc-Aspac), Leo Fernandez (IndiaLink, Delhi), Scott Weikart (IGC, USA) — to name but a few, provided critical support in the early days of the Programme.

Most of our experiences from men joining the Programme work spaces have been positive. The fact that they have taken the time and effort to lend their support and become involve, was often the outward expression of their recognition and acceptance of the way we work. When the motivation for joining the space was an expression of men's 'right' to be involved, tensions and suspicions often surfaced and the impact of their involvement was felt in a less constructive way.

Combining these principles with our open membership policy, the network has been able to provide a 'home', support base and reference point for many women media practitioners. It has provided a space where they can be creative, assertive, supportive or supported, teacher or pupil, mentor or mentored.

### **Consolidation and activity**

During the two years prior to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, women's groups began tentative encounters with the new technology. Many of the electronic networking projects and initiatives responded to the emergent issues at that time. These issues invariably concerned access to training, credit, equipment, and 'know-how'; impact of the new technologies on women's already overburdened lives; appropriateness of a technology that is strongly male-centric, expensive, and produced in the North; and questions about security and privacy. There was also the issue of language, and in an Internet dominated by English-language content, this remains a seemingly insurmountable barrier.

Issues and barriers, notwithstanding, women of APC and their colleagues from other organisations began linking up and prepared for the Beijing Conference.

Seizing the opportunity, the coordinating committee of the WNSP implemented a set of activities that provided a kind of 'kick-start' to the Programme.



The initial activities implemented by the coordinating committee of WNSP:

- ▶ documenting the names and numbers of women and women's groups using e-mail at the time (40 when we started);
- ▶ organising content (on issues such as health, violence, labour, environment and development) into electronic newsgroups;
- ▶ making content available to all women's groups using e-mail that we were aware of; (APC's policy at the time was to provide access to the APC Newsgroup series only to users of APC networks. The WNSP lobbied to change this policy in relation to the content that was relevant and critical for women.)
- ▶ encouraging every APC member and partner to identify a 'focal point' for the WNSP;
- ▶ establishing connections and building relationships with the focal points;
- ▶ fundraising to subsidise the cost of women receiving this content, particularly if they were based in the South; (This was really a critical aspect of our work at the time. The cost of accessing e-mail was really prohibitive for most women, even those who did have a computer and telephone line. These subsidies often made the difference between participating or not.)
- ▶ encouraging women to establish their own electronic newsgroups, particularly at a regional level.

In 1993, less than half a dozen electronic newsgroups focused on women's issues available via APC networks. By the end of 1997, there were over 50. Some of the first regional newsgroups were:

<apngowid.meet> — Nov 1993: A conference for information on the various plans, preparations, and activities being initiated and undertaken by the Asia Pacific regional women's groups, organisations, and networks in connection with the Fourth United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (4th WCW) to be held in Beijing in September 1995. This conference was hosted by the E-mail Centre in the Philippines, and facilitated by Isis International-Manila.

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<amlat.mujeres> — Oct 1993: similar to <apngowid.meet> but for the Latin American Region, and then went on to become a planning space for the Latin American WNSP network.

<africa.wcw.news> — Feb 1995: A conference that aimed to keep African women's organisations informed about preparations for the UNWCW, to share their strategies and information.

In addition to this, the 'Gender and Information Technology Project' which ran from 1993 to 1996 and which was funded by the IDRC (International Development Research Council) provided the opportunity for technical and policy training workshops to be held in Africa, Asia and Latin America:

- ▶ for women technicians to attend the Internet Society's Developing Countries technical workshop
- ▶ for women-to-women training workshops
- ▶ for groundbreaking research on women's use of ICT<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ WNSP staff to be recompensed

### **National and regional networks (1995-1997)**

The APCWNSP is an international network. It strives to respond to the needs of national and regional networks by developing activities and projects that respond to regionally defined priorities. The work it implements at an international level relates directly to those areas where international collaboration and action is appropriate, such as:

- ▶ policy and advocacy,
- ▶ solidarity for campaigns and alerts,
- ▶ as a reference point for resource, skills and knowledge sharing,
- ▶ for interaction with international initiatives such as WomenAction,
- ▶ for strategic partnership building with United Nations agencies such as UNIFEM and the Division For the Advancement of Women.

One of the great strengths of the Programme is that of the national and regional networks. Women's Internet based networks have been evolving since



the early 90's. It is interesting to look at some of the milestones in the evolution of a few of these networks and how they interact with one another now.

APC-Africa-Women is one of the strongest of the regional networks associated with the APCWNSP. It is the African regional network of the APCWNSP, but it also operates within its own context and responds to the needs of its local communities. To this extent, it operates both collectively and autonomously in the network structure. This is quite typical of the nature of the relationship between the national, regional and international 'rings' of the network.

### **Mercy Wambui, APC-Africa-Women**

The origins of APC-Africa-Women can be traced back to the work of several women, all pioneers of ICT and gender activism; to consistent donor support for Africa-wide ICT projects; and to the creative partnerships and alliances built among NGOs, donors and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) at the macro-policy level.

One of these pioneering women is Mercy Wambui. Mercy was probably the first woman in Kenya to engage with the ICT struggle. I first met Mercy 'electronically.' Mercy worked for ECONews Africa, a Nairobi based NGO which used Environment Liaison Centre International (ELCI) for its e-mail services. ECONews Africa had responded to a needs-assessment that GreenNet undertook to determine the feasibility of providing support for women's electronic networking activities in Africa.

I finally met Mercy 'face-to-face' in 1992 at a sub-regional workshop which was part of the Conference on Environment and Development process (The Earth Summit). I was in Nairobi to work with the system operator of the (ELCI). This was during a time when there was no easy 'point-and-click' graphical software, and people had to confront 'DOS' programmes which often required understanding DOS commands. The software was cumbersome and labourious. The phone lines were not good,

and power restrictions were many and often.

There was no 'Internet' as we know it. People had to pay for the time taken to deliver and receive e-mail messages sent across the international phone lines. Skills and 'know-how' were scarce. The use of phone lines for the exchange of computer generated-data was a legal offence at that time as small e-mail 'hubs' needed to be registered under the Kenyan Telecommunications Act. None of them could afford the registration fees. This situation demonstrated how critical it was for women to not only use the technology, but also to understand the policy environment governing the use of the technology itself.

Mercy worked tirelessly to raise awareness within the NGO community of the need to engage with new communications technologies. She organised trainings, informal gatherings and information sharing sessions at little cost but with long lasting benefit. As women began to prepare for the Fourth World Conference on Women, an opportunity presented itself to expand the outreach to a continental audience at the regional preparatory meeting for the UNWCW.

Today, Mercy is the communications officer at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and is instrumental in providing the link between macro ICT policy initiatives of the UNECA, and APC-Africa-Women.

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No two stories are the same. The evolution of the different national and regional networks of APCWNSP has its own unique characteristics and challenges. Many have gone on to reap successes. But all have flourished or grown to become strong networks.

One of the most inspiring national networks associated with the APCWNSP is Women'sNet in South Africa.<sup>20</sup> Women'sNet was established in 1998 and is a core member of the APC-Africa-Women network. It also participates in the international programme through activities such as WomenAction. In addi-

### **Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla, ENDA Synfev and APC Africa-Women**

I met Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla in late 1993. Marie-Helene works with ENDA Tiers Monde based in Senegal. ENDA Tiers Monde was the home of 'ENDA', the APC partner in Senegal, which provided e-mail services to its own teams as well as to other NGOs in Dakar.

Initially, Marie-Helene was very sceptical about the usefulness of e-mail and electronic newsgroups in her work. What she needed was access to useful fact sheets and background materials for women concerning health and reproductive rights. What she also needed was information that was in French. The information which was available electronically then was of little or no use to Marie-Helene. Information was primarily written by and for European women, mostly coming from the United States. Nonetheless, Marie-Helene became convinced of the potential of the tool.

In 1994, ENDA, ENDA Synfev and GreenNet provided on-site communication services at the regional preparatory meeting for the UNWCW process, which was held in Dakar, Senegal. There were two computers and no phone line. The Women's Feature Service (WFS) were in the booth across the corridor. Their office was always a bustle with journalists working on the daily newspaper which

WFS produced. Our room was bustling slightly less. Women were cautious - but they were curious.

More time was spent talking to women about e-mail, as opposed to starting straight out with hands-on instruction. 'Orientation' sessions, as we called them, were a very important part in building trust with women and women's groups.

The APC women spent most of the time typing out and uploading conference documents, including the text of the WFS newspaper. The mail messages were copied onto a diskette, and once a day, the ENDA system operator, Moussa Fall, drove the diskette back to the ENDA office where it was uploaded to the ENDA host, and sent to GreenNet via an international phone call. From there, the information was disseminated through the APC electronic newsgroups which found their way to groups who further distributed information, such as ECONews Africa, ZARD, TAMWA, and fem-net.

### **Haymee Perez, EBONET**

In Angola, Haymee Perez was on the path to becoming the first woman to run an ISP in Africa - Angonet, later to become 'EBONET' - the first full Internet service in Angola. Again, language was a huge barrier. Just as there was minimal French content online, Portuguese content



tion, Women'sNet's is a core member of Flame/Flamme: African Sisters Organising OnLine, a bilingual (French and English) electronic networking initiative that help African women NGOs participate more effectively in the Beijing+5 process. Women'sNet also works closely with the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN).

was even more difficult to find. An introduction to the then APC member in Brazil, Alternex, provided an opportunity for some information exchange in Portuguese.

In Zambia, Regina Shakakata, a librarian at the University of Zambia, board member of 'UNZA', (small e-mail host based at the University of Zambia) and member of ZARD (Zambian Association for Research and Development), was advocating for the extension of e-mail services to health practitioners in the rural north. Regina was mentor and network 'mother' to many African women who grappled with e-mail and the Internet.

These women and their initiatives intersected and interacted through the online support network that was emerging within APC. During the 12 months in the run-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the apc.women online space became increasingly active as preparations were made for Beijing.

In March 1996, the first Africa-wide women's electronic networking workshop took place in Johannesburg, South Africa. The workshop was hosted by Sangonet, the South African APC member. Women from Angola, Morocco, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Senegal, South Africa and Kenya participated with resource people from the UK, Trinidad and the Philippines attending. This workshop provided the basis for a strong relationship that would develop be-

tween Sangonet, Enda Synfev and ECONews Africa through the work of Mercy Wambui, and form the basis of the early APC-Africa-Women network.

During 1996 and 1997, workshops were organised in Francophone West Africa, East and Southern Africa. These workshops provided basic e-mail training, while addressing issues of language, generating local content, issue-based networking (for example, working with women advocates for improved nutrition and living conditions for African women in Francophone west Africa and the Maghreb) and policy advocacy.

In December 1997, the APC-Africa-Women network was formalised, and in January 1998, the 'apc-africa-women' mailing list was established. The first members of the mailing lists were: Mercy Wambui, Anriette Esterhuysen, Regina Shakakta, Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla, Muthoni Muriu, Mukami Karingu, Maureen James, Jill Small and Maja Van der Velden. Mercy Wambui was endorsed as coordinator and Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla facilitated the online workspace.

In the past two years, APC-Africa-Women has become one of the reference points for women's Internet-based networks, not only in Africa, but in the world. ■



### Learning — network to network

The stories of APC-Africa-Women, the APCWNSP EE and Women'sNet are of each unique. But several of the characteristics and strategies of these networks can also be gleaned from the stories of other national and regional networks that have since evolved.<sup>21</sup>

Networks can and do learn from one another's experiences. Sometimes, common issues are recognised and similar strategies are adapted. There are many examples of this in the life of the APCWNSP.

- ▶ Basic computer hardware and software maintenance notes are written in Spanish by Sarah Masters and Virtudes Berroa of Proyecto

#### **Anna Syomina, Mama86 and the APCWNSP EE Network**

Anna Syomina is a founding member of Mama86, a women's environmental and advocacy NGO based in Kiev, Ukraine. Established in 1990, Mama86 was established by a group of young mothers in response to the Chernobyl disaster.<sup>16</sup> Anna also worked in user support at the APC Ukraine member GLUK and through the internal apc.women electronic network, found her way to the WNSP.

"I started to use e-mail in the beginning of 1994, trained by Sacred Earth Network, USA in Minsk, Belarus. Such a miracle world had been opened to me! Even without graphics and multimedia, services such as e-mailing, conferencing, telnet and gopher are a great support for the development of NGOs and offered amazing possibilities for information work. In the summer of 1995, during the preparatory period to the World Women's Conference, I started to work within the APC Women's Program.

"My user support work in APC women's international team in Huairou and Beijing is inspiring me. It is the best experience in Internet use by women. Today, MAMA86 is coordinating APC Women's project in Ukraine and MAMA86 plays the role of the GLUK's Point of Presence in Kiev."<sup>17</sup>

Anna points out further in her report, that women engaged in technology have significant barriers to overcome.

"Ukraine faces a rather controversial situation. Sixty percent of working specialists are women with College and University education. But very few women have permanent access to the Internet, and to computers due to the low level of computerisation; economic crisis; lack of infrastructure, training facilities, and good phone line; language problems, etc. The groups with access to the Internet consist mostly of NGO leaders, journalists, scientists and a small number of technical women."<sup>18</sup>

From 1996–1997, Anna was the coordinator of the APCWNSP EE (Eastern European) network. The network



Comunicacion Mediada por Computadora (Dominican Republic). Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla of the FamAfrique network based at ENDA Synfev (Senegal) sees these materials at a conference in New York, and translates the documents into French for the FamAfrique Website and mailing list.

- ▶ Attending a regional workshop and then holding national level events which 'replicate' the impact.
- ▶ Erika Smith of Laneta's Women's Programme (Mexico) dreams of building a women's internet network and the experience of Women'sNet South Africa.
- ▶ Women based at GreenNet in London are inspired by the work of South African WomesNet and begin a UK Women'sNet project.

which was funded by SOSOR had participants from APC Members and partners from Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Former Yugoslavia, Russia and Ukraine.

The initiative was important in raising awareness around ICT issues. It allowed for many women to be trained in the basic use of e-mail and electronic conferencing, and it funded the participation of women from Eastern Europe in the team that went to Beijing.

However, several major barriers prevented the APCWNSP-EE initiative from developing into a strong women's Internet-based network.

Access: There was practically no equipment, no telephone, no access to training, particularly in the rural parts of the countries.

Language: Only English and Spanish content were available, and in addition, the technology available at the time made it almost impossible for women to communicate in any of the Cyrillic based languages.<sup>19</sup>

Context: The notion of a 'women's movement' or indeed even 'women's issues' was one which was developing very slowly, even more so than in other movements such as the emerging environmental movement.

The final recommendation of the report written by Anna notes that the absence of face-to-face meetings and the urgent need for permanent translation services were also major barriers that prevented the network from developing strongly.

The work of Mama86 continues to this day and Anna remains committed to advocating the use of ICTs to women in the CIS region (Commonwealth of Independent States). Although the APCWNSP EE network did not survive in the ways women might have hoped, networks have emerged in the region and have flourished. No doubt the experiences from the early 1990s have played a part in the longer-term development of women's Internet-based networks. One such example is the network of East-West (NEWW) women which is documented in Toolkit 3 of this series. ▶

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- ▶ Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) learning from the experience of APCWNSP in building an Internet-based network.
- ▶ Using a mix of media to 'amplify' the work and voices of women using TV, radio, newspaper, and Internet-based tools (APCWNSP's involvement with WomenAction).
- ▶ In the words of Marie-Helen Mottin-Sylla at Enda Synfev, Femmes Afrique and Synfev are "greatly indebted to Women'sNet in South Africa" which have provided "technical help and ideas on women and ICTs."
- ▶ Women technicians from different regions sharing tips, tools and know-how with one another, via e-mail.

### Financial Support

The Programme has enjoyed significant support from a wide range of donors. Granted, this support was far more difficult to come by in the early years of the Programme when the Internet and new technologies were still an enigma to most of us. But some donors were visionary and provided the seed money to strengthen the basis for the Programme's future.

In more recent years, the Programme has enjoyed donor relationships that have been less one way and more of a partnership in nature. This active relationship with donors has provided the Programme with networking opportunities and certain 'synergies' which allowed it to evolve tightly-connected initiatives.

#### Agencies who have helped APCWNSP through the years

Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (Canada)	Mama Cash (Netherlands)
CIDA (Singapore office)	NGO Planning Committee (New York, USA)
EMW (Evangelische Missionswerk - Germany)	NirvCentre (Canada)
Ford Foundation (USA)	Soros Foundation (USA)
Global Fund for Women (USA)	UNDP (USA)
HIVOS (Netherlands)	UNIFEM (USA)
IDRC (Canada)	World Association for Christian Communications (WACC, UK)
IPS (InterPress Service, New York, USA)	Weeden Foundation (New York, USA)
MacArthur Foundation (USA)	



## **Institutional support**

Institutional support operates in two levels. First, is the support that is given to an individual member of the network and second, is the support that is given to the network (or networks, if we consider that there are also autonomous national and regional network members of the Programme).

The first level of support involves women who work with mixed (women and men) organisations. Although we might assume that a women-led or women-only organisation would provide support for the participation of a staff member in the work of APCWNSP, such is not always the case. Many organisations — mixed as well as women-only — are struggling to come to terms with their own position and policies regarding the ICTs.

ICTs have gender, political, class and socio-economic biases that often work against women. It is not surprising that women's groups working for the advancement and empowerment of women are wary of the disempowering and marginalising impact which ICT could foist on women. Hardly a day goes by now when we are not bombarded with banners and headlines about the 'information haves and have-nots' or the increasing 'digital divides'. In fact, without recognising these biases and dangers, it is impossible to advocate the use of ICT in a responsible way.

Many of the women who participate in APCWNSP independently from their respective base organisation are working to create a greater awareness and understanding within their organisations of the intrinsic relationships of technology, politics, and culture. The Programme tries to provide these members with access to policy briefings, resource persons, and other materials than can help their work. Equally important, the Programme also provides a safe and positive space for them to continue their activism while they attend to issues in their base organisations.

The network is 'virtual'. It has no office, no assets, no leased line, no servers, no physical context at all. Yet, it needs access to these resources if it is to function. This institutional role has always been provided by one of the APC members and collectively, APC, as an international network has been an incredibly important factor contributing towards sustaining the network.

This support is provided in terms of physical space, administrative support and technical support. The Programme's global and regional coordina-



tors have normally been able to secure office space within an existing APC member. This would include access to printers, photocopiers, fax, telephone, and Internet. APC member-networks have also invariably provided access to postal services, stationery, accounting services, and other administrative support. Finally, having access to technology that either you or someone you trust owns or controls, provides a solid technical basis for the network.

This type of support has been provided by many of the APC members and partners, with the most significant contributions coming from Sangonet (South Africa), Equanex (Ecuador), GreenNet (UK), IGC (USA), Laneta (Mexico), ENDA (Senegal) and Web (Canada). Partners such as E-mail Centre (Philippines), IndiaLink (India) have also been invaluable.

As the Programme develops, more and more women are working from their homes and this kind of institutional support is not necessarily an option. Currently, the support is given 'one step removed', that is, the support is given through a Programme member who is based at an APC member instead of directly to the Programme itself. This is certainly an issue which needs to be examined carefully in terms of its impact on the sustainability of the Programme.

## THE FUTURE

Five years ago, the APCWNSP was concerned with raising general awareness about the importance of women engaging with ICTs. Addressing questions of basic access and connectivity, providing training opportunities and materials, and engaging in discourse with regards to the so-called benefits of joining the Information Superhighway filled our waking days.

Far greater numbers of women are now using new communication technologies in their work, but the issues identified five years ago still remain to be critical for most women in the world. Majority of the world's women still do not have access to a telephone line, let alone a computer or the skills and knowledge to exploit the new technologies and to make these work for her. But in addition to these, we now have to contend with new issues and challenges such as:

- ▶ rapid commercialisation of the Internet, where women are seen primarily as an important 'target group';



- ▶ the increasing convergence of transnational mainstream media with the power of the Internet, such as the corporate merger between Ted Turner's media empire and America On Line (AOL), which threatens to pipe homogenised content into everyone's living room by the year 2005;
- ▶ intensifying attempts by governments to restrict free and democratic access to the Internet by developing legislation attempting to regulate its use;
- ▶ ascendancy of international trade bodies working to encompass the terms of exchange of 'information products' and 'knowledge'; and
- ▶ emergence of international private alliances which seek to 'govern' the Internet from above.

In this environment, the APCWNSP's priorities over the coming years will be on three main areas of concern: Training, Policy and Advocacy and Network Capacity-Building.

Last June 2000, over 30 women's media, communications and information groups participated in an initiative called WomenAction.

The UNWCW Conference in 1995 provided an important impetus for the work of the APCWNSP and women's media advocacy groups from all over the world. Five years hence, the Beijing+5 Review provided the opportunity for a far more ambitious project to bring together women's media, and communications and information networks from all over the world to collaborate towards increasing women's awareness and participation in the review process. WomensAction was the vehicle for such a global collaboration. Its participants are women engaged in information dissemination and communication access using a variety of media: Internet, radio, video, interactive Web-TV, newspaper.

Over a twelfth-month period, WomenAction initiated training workshops, facilitated online consultations, built Websites, crafted policy positions, and undertook research. All these activities and energies were focused on getting women's voices heard during the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) — the forum where governments, UN agencies and NGOs were to be held accountable for commitments they had made in 1995 and that are etched in the document 'Beijing Platform For Action.'

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### Looking at the World Through Women's Eyes — Women Speak Out — 1995

The APCWNSP is probably best known for its pioneering work during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (UNWCW). The work from 1993-1995 culminated in the on-site communications initiative in China at the UN Official Conference and NGO Parallel forum. Our priority was to work with the women's movement and so our services were designed for the women activist delegates (although the centre was also frequented by the Press and Government delegates.)

The Beijing team was one of the most diverse we had ever formed — forty members, from 25 countries speaking 18 languages<sup>23</sup>. The power of the visible demonstration of women doing 'all things technical' — installing the leased line, setting up 200 workstations and 10 'servers' — providing 'round-the-clock' technical maintenance (and everything else from user support to trainings and orientation sessions, from diplomacy to advocating Information technology policies to the United Nations) was such that as a model, the Beijing activities of the APCWNSP provided inspiration to many other women-led onsite communication initiatives.

"Besides, who needs visibility, real or virtual, when women are seen only through the eyes of men." (Pi Villanueva, 1997)

But more than the on-site communications work (which was a critical media and communication tool), the success of our policy advocacy to include a strategic objective in the main conference document was the impact

of a powerful women's networking experience, the culmination of several years' work-building and the strong linkages between women's groups and women's networks.

The Beijing Platform For Action, Strategic objective J.1. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication

A certain 'synergy' developed in the final months of the run-up to Beijing. Many women's media and communication networks, working with a range of media (television, newspaper, video, radio, Internet) collaborated in putting forward women and media policy proposals to the UN and working together to facilitate information flow and exchange via as many media as possible. Many of these women's media groups started incorporating awareness-raising and training about the new technologies into their strategic plans, their proposals, and their budgets.

By the end of 1995, a certain 'critical mass' of awareness had evolved among women and media advocacy groups, and women activists using the Internet. The term 'Information Superhighway' was bandied about, early visions of 'global villages without borders' entered our consciousness and the World Wide Web had just presented itself to a lucky few in the North, but practically none in the South.

It was in this context that a handful of Internet-based women's networks took their first wary steps. ▀



Although women were united in their disappointment with the outcome of the UNGASS<sup>22</sup>, the work done by media and communication activists of WomenAction is unparalleled. They were able to ensure that women's concerns and proposals get to be placed squarely on the UNGASS' table by spreading the news, discussing the critical issues, telling women's stories through radio and TV interviews, publishing in mailing lists and websites), mediating with local and national papers, and lobbying with conference delegates,

One of the clearest expressions of this perseverance is the document produced by the NGO Women and Media Caucus, the 'Declaration to UNGASS of the NGO Caucus on Women and Media'. [note: 'Section J' refers to the chapter in the Beijing Platform For Action which focuses on Women and Media]

"Any serious review of Section J (Women and Media) of the Beijing Platform for Action has to address the emerging scenario at the global, regional, national, and local level. It must recognise the strategic weakness of Section J, which failed to articulate the structural constraints and impediments that women and other marginal groups face due to commercialisation and globalisation of media and the concomitant decline of public broadcasting media in societies with democratic and pluralistic traditions.

"Not only has the Beijing Plus 5 review failed to meet this challenge, but the outcomes document scarcely refers to media and communications at all. We call upon the United Nations to create the conditions for a broad and inclusive debate on communication issues and their implications for democracy and social justice. We also call for a World Conference on Communication with 50% female participation in which women and other marginalised citizens must have an equal voice with governments and the private sector, as a fundamental contribution to gender equality, development and peace."

Clearly there is still a lot of work to be done. Women media activists and women's media networks need to continue to build their capacities; develop skills in a broad range of areas; keep abreast of technical development; be involved in policy making fora; understand the implications of national, regional and international policy environments and discourses; develop responses and proposals; form alliances; lobby for full and democratic access; and support one another while doing all of the other myriad tasks.



The WNSP has achieved much of this, but in a small way. We recognise that the impact of our work, while impressive, is felt by only a small number of privileged, pre-dominantly European, middle-class women. Our work has probably touched the lives of hundreds of women directly, and thousands of women indirectly. But our dream is for the flourishing of strong Internet-based women's networks, which are truly diverse and representative and which will be better able to move the Women and Information Technology agenda forward. ○

## ENDNOTES

- 1 From the APC electronic newsgroup <gen.women>, posted by asta.unih@oln.comlink.apc.org, May 1992.  
Let Every Woman Be A Witch - Feminism and Third World Development by Kamla Bhasin, India
- 2 The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is a global network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the Internet.
- 3 Please see <http://www.gn.apc.org>
- 4 Please see <http://www.igc.org>
- 5 Please see <http://www.web.ca>
- 6 Please see <http://www.nicarao.apc.org>
- 7 The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is a global network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the Internet. Please see <http://www.apc.org>
- 8 I am reminded of an experience from 1993. My father asked me to give a presentation on the work I was doing to a meeting of the local 'Rotarians'. It was the first (and last) time I can remember standing in front of a room full of men, who had very little, if nothing, to say after I had finished. Another myth debunked: there



are many men who also don't understand the technology, they're just not as often as willing to admit it.

- 9 Interdoc is a network of like-minded individuals and organisations which considers itself part of a larger stream of social movements that advocate reforms in favor of the underprivileged, to attain development by empowering instead of exploiting the weak, working for the distribution instead of concentration of wealth, and harmonising with instead of destroying the environment.
- 10 This subject is covered in detail in Toolkit 1 of this series — *Putting Beijing Online*.
- 11 Please see <http://community.web.net/apcwomen>
- 12 Please see Toolkit 3: *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally*.
- 13 Please see <http://www.famafrique.org>
- 14 Please see <http://flamme.org>
- 15 Please see the article about WomenAction in this Toolkit.
- 16 "Caused by the heavy industrial pollution and Chernobyl disaster consequences, only 1/3 of the Ukrainian territory is considered by the national experts appropriate for human beings." (Anna Syomina, WNSP Annual Meeting Report, Quito, 1997)
- 17 Anna Syomina, WNSP Annual Meeting Report, Quito, 1997
- 18 Anna Syomina, WNSP Annual Meeting Report, Quito, 1997
- 19 This is a particularly prevalent problem for the Asian region, particularly East Asia (Japan, Korea, etc.).
- 20 Please see Toolkit 3 of this series for a full case study on Women'sNet.
- 21 Case studies of Women'sNet (South Africa), Latin American WNSP, Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC), the francophone FemAfrique and the Network of East-West Women (NEWW) are included in Toolkit 3: *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally*.
- 22 The UNGASS Outcomes document can be found at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/>
- 23 For the full Beijing Report of WNSP, see <http://www.apcwomen.org/projects/beijing.html>

# *Directions for Women's Advocacy on ICT* Putting New Technologies on the Gender Agenda

*Sally Burch and Irene Leon*

The transformation of gender roles is one of the most profound changes that have marked the 20th century. Particularly in the last 25 years, as equal rights for women have progressively won recognition, these changes have gained greater momentum. Such gains have largely been won through pressure tactics and advocacy of women who have organised for their rights and struggled to enter new fields of action.

Only a hundred years ago, women were still excluded from most spheres of public activity. Even today, in many areas, there is still a long road to trek to break down entrenched prejudices and overcome barriers to achieve equality in practice.

Precisely for this reason, communication has been identified as a particularly sensitive and strategic area for women's advocacy and action, since it is an intrinsic part of the social system of transmitting values and reinforcing — or transforming — gender roles. But recently, a new facet of communication advocacy has come to the forefront with the emergence of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the shift towards the so-called information society. While on the one hand, the communications industry has become more and more closely enmeshed with the very structures of power, on the other, the right to communicate has become a strategic requirement for women to fully exercise their citizenship.

Women's advocacy in the field of communication and ICTs has therefore broadened its scope. In addition to addressing specific issues of women in communications, it also relates to fundamental political and social rights that are indispensable to bring about any real transformation of gender roles.



## WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

There are a number of definitions of advocacy, but in a civil society or NGO context it generally refers to redressing unequal power relationships and implies moving beyond the politics of protest to the politics of engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Effective advocacy is the capacity to generate discourse, that is, to develop and substantiate arguments in favour of a given cause, through activities such as research, diagnostics, developing visions, formulating proposals and claims.

But to be effective, this discourse needs to gain social recognition: the proposals must not just be well argued out but must be seen as legitimate. Legitimacy will be greater if representative social actors, such as the women's movement, appropriates the discourse and projects it towards the rest of society. Today, this will almost inevitably include action in the field of communication towards influencing public opinion.

Redressing unequal power relationships can be approached from different levels. Usually a first level of empowerment is simply the recognition by the disempowered that the unequal relationship can be changed. This can be approached through conscientisation; that is when the disempowered becomes convinced of the need to take action.

A second level relates to who determines what issues and which actors get to the policy-making table. Action at this level requires gaining recognition as legitimate interlocutors. A third level is building the power to win on key issues, which implies forming alliances and, depending on the degree of resistance to the issue, may require combining negotiation with other forms of pressure.

In fact, advocacy employs multiple tools and can take place in multiple arenas. Moreover, while advocacy at the global level is usually about changing or introducing legislation and policies, it can also be about changing concrete reality, particularly at the local level.

In this article we will be referring mainly to women's advocacy on ICT issues in global policy-making spheres. Because ICTs operate in a realm that largely ignores national borders and laws, the global domain is a key arena



for action. But we need to keep in mind that this is only one link in the chain, which will be effective only if women are taking up the proposals and putting them forward in their local and national spheres, to ensure that they are translated into concrete actions, laws and policies.

## GROUNDING APCWNSP'S POLICY INITIATIVES

When the Women's Networking Support Programme of the Association for Progressive Communications (APWNSP) started out in 1993, one of its strengths was the foresight to orient its action around the implications of rapid changes in global communications. At the outset, the APCWNSP recognised that these changes had created the need to open a new chapter in the field of women's advocacy in relation to communication and technology.

The APCWNSP was created on the basis of the Association for Progressive Communications, a globally-focused network with a strong presence in the South as well as the North. This has created in the APCWNSP itself, a strong awareness and commitment to giving equal weight to the regional disparities in distribution of technology and information, together with the gender disparities.

The proposals which WNSP developed from this vision continue to be one of its most outstanding assets. These proposals have taken shape through two lines of activity. On the one hand, policy proposals and advocacy in favour of creating a more equal terrain for women in this field, and on the other, promotion, support and strategy proposals for women's concrete appropriation of the new communication tools and spaces.

When the Programme was created in 1993, the prevailing discourse on new technologies revolved around the "information superhighway," and how supposedly this would allow access to education and knowledge for all, democratise information, and provide tools for empowerment and development.

The response of the APCWNSP was to assert that access to the so-called "information superhighway" should be equitable, particularly between genders, as well as socially and geographically. The main focus at that stage was therefore on claiming more equal distribution of infrastructure and resources,



and on training women to have the necessary know-how so that they could reap the benefits of the new communication tools.

But even at that early stage, the APCWNSP was already aware that while the rapid expansion of access to ICTs would revolutionise communication, "the direction this revolution would take (whether towards a more democratic communicational fabric, or to greater control of people's minds through more subtle means) would depend on the correlation of forces and the democratising initiatives developed from civil society". [Burch, 1994]

Today, seven years later, the context has substantially shifted. A new and very different discourse on new technologies has emerged, dominated by the media hype about the Internet, which is centred on e-business, the stock exchange and entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

As the tentacles of global networks spread, a broader range of issues and concerns is coming to the fore. Among these are the new manifestations of gender discrimination, new areas of human rights violations, and new barriers against the democratic deployment of communication tools.

A series of recent analyses already show evidence that, if present tendencies continue, the overall development impact of ICTs could be negative. Already, there are signs of deepening exclusion for a majority of the world's population — in which women are likely to count in a higher proportion than men — and of increased disparities between countries and regions in terms of economic and social development.

In the development community, access to ICTs is often presented as a panacea to development problems. It is a recognised fact that access to electronic networks continues to belong to a privileged elite. Figures from the 1999 UNDP World Development Report indicate a scarce 2.4 percent of the world population with access to the Internet. Of this, less than 1 percent come from regions of the South. Meanwhile, the typical user profile is a young, white educated male. [UNDP:1999].

But neither access to ICT nor technical training, in themselves, can provide adequate solutions to problems of knowledge acquisition and development, commercial barriers, basic educational deficiencies, language discrimination and cultural alienation. All these are critical issues in information and communication, manifestations of long-standing structural gaps between genders, classes, ethnic groups and geographic regions.



Commercial and business interests have contributed to the rapid popularisation of the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web. However, there is mounting concern about the implications of ICT development being driven almost exclusively by the desire for higher profit margins, often at the expense of more humanitarian concerns. In this scenario, the role assigned to women is reduced to that of being mere cyber consumers whose capacity to influence the evolution of cyberspace depends on how high one's credit card limit is. It goes without saying that the majority of women who have no buying power have no place in this "brave new world."

To respond to the many emerging challenges, women's organisations, led by those concerned more directly with communication, have been developing advocacy and policy proposals guided by a more integral vision of women's involvement with information and communication technologies. As a result, spaces have been carved where women can continue to develop alternative content and strategies. But the pace of change has been so fast, and the balance of power so overwhelmingly unequal. Daily, it is becoming difficult to defend and expand the spaces of women's counter-hegemonic practice in information and communication technology.

This situation demands a constant effort to understand the changes that are taking place, and to share this understanding as widely as possible within the women's movement, and with other civil society organisations. By evolving new strategies and defining new rights and entitlements that respond to new situations and challenges, a wave of opinion may be created strong enough to make governments and global decision-makers pay attention.

## **UN WOMEN'S CONFERENCES: INFLUENCING THE GOVERNMENTAL AGENDA**

Women's advocacy in communication and media, in the course of the last 10 years or more, has focused particularly on three broad issues. These issues are: women's access to professional careers and decision-making positions that have been traditionally male reserves; the equitable access of women and women's organisations to the means of public expression; and portrayal of women as it relates to the role of images in reinforcing or changing stereotypes. Notably, there has recently been a shift from an emphasis on women solely as objects of information (i.e. as images), to a focus on women



as subjects of information (i.e. as journalists, opinion makers and news protagonists).

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 provided a platform for carrying on a global debate on women's policy advocacies in communication and media. Coinciding with the Internet boom, the Fourth World Conference on Women also became an opportunity to raise awareness about the urgency of broadening media and communication advocacies to include a new dimension relating to ICTs.

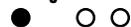
As an APC document underlined:

"The governments of the industrial powers and transnational communications corporations are involved in negotiations relating to the future of the communications industry and among other aspects, to the international distribution of cyberspace (that is, the infrastructure and legislation that will determine the operation of computer networks.) Women's and citizens' groups do not have a voice in the negotiations which will influence national and international legislation and therefore their access to technological and information resources. It is therefore imperative to create mechanisms for them to formulate and defend their needs and interests." [APC: 1995]<sup>3</sup>

The concerted lobbying effort of women's organisations, along with the support of some governments, notably that of Haiti, succeeded in bringing a broader focus on communication and ICTs into the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), the document adopted at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women. This document outlines the actions governments had promised to take to advance the status of women around the world.

In June 2000, a United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) was convened to review the status of the Beijing Platform for Action. A year before that, women's organisations everywhere had already started to do their own social accounting and review of the BPFA. This year-long process had been popularly referred to as the Beijing +5. For APCWNSP, the Beijing +5 was the second high-point for its ICT policy initiatives in the global arena.

It was encouraging to discover a growing body of women eager to debate, formulate proposals and take action on these issues. More than a thousand people across the world registered for the "Women-media" on-line



consultation, organised by the UN Internet initiative Women Watch and facilitated by WomenAction.<sup>4</sup> A number of these women joined the Media Caucus, created to put forward proposals relating to media and communication issues.<sup>5</sup>

Governments however have been passive at best, and obstructionist at worst, towards women's ICT agenda. Despite mounting evidences that ICT is becoming a key development issue, the Beijing +5 showed how little interest governments have in taking this up as a priority concern. Moreover, state actors, particularly from the Western powers, clearly resisted the inclusion of any references to more democratic forms of regulating the information and communications industry. As one participant of the Media Caucus pointed out:

"We from the US had a special problem in that our official delegation was totally opposed to anything that had to do with broadcasting coming into the document... The US delegation even made it a part of their Reservations statement when the document was adopted, to specify that nothing in the document could be considered binding on the media." [Media Caucus electronic mailing list, July 2000.]

The good news is that women's organisations are now invited to bring to the discussion table their views on issues. The bad news is, they are not always able to determine the agenda.

## KEY ISSUES

The critical discussions around women and ICTs examine the issues from a specific gender focus, while attempting to incorporate a global vision of the issues from a feminist perspective. Possibly for this reason, women's advocacy proposals and actions on ICT issues have in several aspects been recognised as innovative in the field of civil society networking.<sup>6</sup>

One of the advantages of a gender equality perspective on ICTs — as was recognised at a recent UN expert meeting on the subject<sup>7</sup> — is that it trains a critical eye on the disparities in the distribution of benefits from ICTs and advocates the urgency of taking actions to ensure equal and equitable sharing of these benefits. To quote from one policy expert, "Gender equality advocates are particularly well placed to do this because their links with the



human development communities are better developed than advocates of mainstream approaches to ICT and development. In addition, in gender equality approaches to human development goals and objectives are considered as core and not subordinated”.

The following are some of the key issues that have emerged from the recent debates and discussions around women and ICTs.<sup>8</sup>

### **The big picture: Globalisation and ICTs**

The development of ICTs is at the cutting-edge of economic development, and is closely interlinked to the globalisation process. Any approach, therefore, to women and ICT issues that does not look at the global picture risks missing the mark.

As transnational corporations seek mergers between different, and previously separate branches of the telecommunications, media and entertainment sectors, pressure is brought down on national agencies to implement deregulation of telecommunications. Leading the global campaign to deregulate and privatise telecommunications are the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

True, the dismantling of state monopolies on telecommunications is accelerating the installation of communications infrastructure and making communication more widely and cheaply available. However, this is also transforming information and communication into commodities to be bought and sold for profit, rather than as essential services the public is entitled to.

The exercise of citizenship, which implies political choices and actions, risks being reduced to that of choosing which globalised media products, technology and e-commerce to purchase. Women in particular are being wooed to this end, since they are considered the main household consumers.

While the battle against the idiotisation of women and ICTs are waged, we cannot forget that the great majority of women have no buying power and no access to modern means of communication. Women in the South are the most likely to be excluded from the present global system, wherein the capacity to participate in the market and to access information have become political currencies as valued as the right to vote.



A further concern of women working in ICTS is the imposition of one dominant culture in international media and cyberspace. This rising cultural homogenisation is raising fears of alienation, threatening the planet's cultural diversity, and exacerbating ethnic conflicts.

### **Access and know-how**

Women's access (or lack thereof) to information technology has been identified as a central concern, particularly when other forms of exclusion persist. As information dynamics accelerate their migration towards the Internet, women without access to ICTs are bound to suffer greater exclusion.

An individual woman's chances of gaining entry in the digital world is dependent on factors such as gender, social class, illiteracy, age, health, geographic location, and other socially-determined categories. For many women who have gained access to modern communication systems like the Internet, being able to participate in networks of information and resources have the effect of exposing the "un-naturalness" of socially-ordained boundaries and limitations. Gaining access, therefore, to communication systems like the Internet serves to conscientise women in the possibility of changing how the world is shaped and how the world shapes women.

But there are also voices that insist that connectivity in itself is not enough. Having the know-how to use ICTs critically and creatively is as important, if not more so, as gaining access to ICTs. Criticism has lobbed at ICT development programs that all too often concentrate excessively on access to technology and information sources, as though computers and modems are sufficient to solve development problems.

Training and education are considered equally important as gaining access to software and hardware. Moreover, it has been pointed out that training programs for women should focus not only on how to use the new communication tools. Training women in ICT should also involve learning about how to find, manage, produce and disseminate information; and how to develop policies and strategies to intervene effectively in the shaping of ICTs.

Major concerns like illiteracy and language barriers to information access, gender and cultural barriers to women's access to careers in technology, soft-



ware and hardware designs that often do not respond to the needs of women and girls, are also being tackled.

Some of the proposals addressing these issues include: inclusion of women's participation in drawing up regulatory frameworks for the telecommunications sector; institutionalisation of guarantees for equity in access; incorporation of gender-based criteria for implementation and pricing policies and development of applications like multilingual tools and databases, interfaces for non Latin alphabets, graphic interfaces for illiterate women, automatic translation softwares.

### **Content**

What content will predominate on the Internet and in new media? Who creates it? What is its cultural bias? Are women's viewpoints, knowledge and interests adequately represented in the new media? How are women portrayed?

These are some of the questions that have been raised relating to content, whether in Internet spaces, video games or virtual reality.

Some of these concerns are an extension of analysis and policy proposals that were formulated previously in relation to sexism and portrayal of women in the media. However, they also relate to a broader range of issues such as the need for women to systematise and develop their own knowledge and perspectives, and to ensure that these are adequately represented in the new media.

A particularly sensitive debate in relation to media content is the use of the Internet for pornography, sexual exploitation or hate literature. Some argue that since pornography and racial slurs are infringements of women's rights, the Internet should be policed. However, many women feel strongly that proposing controls whether on old or new media constitutes an invitation to censorship that might easily be extended to limit other forms of expression. For this reason, promoting voluntary codes of ethics among communication professionals is generally preferred.



## Control and decision-making

Women are acceding in ever-greater numbers to jobs and expertise in the ICT sector. The speed of women's recruitment into this new sector, however, does not necessarily translate into more women coming into positions of decision-making and control of resources.

This distinction is important in the struggle to enable women to increase their chances of benefiting from ICTs, and to make political and economic institutions affecting ICT development accountable to society as a whole. This struggle is on a steep incline as critical decision-making in ICTs gets "depoliticised."

Whether at the global or national levels, decision-making in ICTs is generally treated not as a political domain but as a purely technical area — hence, concerning male experts — where civil society viewpoints are given little or no space. Meanwhile, the deregulation and privatisation of the telecommunications industry is making decision-making in this sector less and less accountable to citizens and local communities.

Security issues in communication systems are another critical concern for women. Women's organisations are addressing issues like having secure online spaces where women feel safe from harassment, strong guarantees for freedom of expression, privacy of communication and protection from electronic snooping. These rights are likely to gain more advocates with the passage of new legislations threatening consecrated human rights, even in countries that consider themselves examples of democracy.

Legislation passed in the UK recently is a worrying example. Among other things, the new law allows interception of electronic communications without a court warrant and obliges Internet Service Providers to hand over to government security agencies the key to encrypted communications of their clients. Under this new law, British authorities via such means as warrant-less electronic snooping can intercept communications between citizens of UK and other countries. Worse, information derived this way can be shared by British authorities with their counterparts from other countries, with no limits on how the information will be used. The law is supposedly intended to prevent international crime, but human rights advocates are very concerned that it might be used to curtail political dissent in UK and overseas.



Unfortunately, the efforts of human rights organisations were insufficient to stop the law being passed. No doubt the scant citizen awareness of the issues meant that public pressure was insufficient, pointing to the urgency of extending the public debate.

The issue of control and women's participation in decision-making in ICTs also relate to women being able to create and manage their own Internet spaces, search engines or portals; to build their own networks; to protect their intellectual property rights while redefining intellectual property regimes; and to gain the necessary guarantees and resources to do all these things and more.

### **Venues for advocacy**

Given the present scope of communications systems, and the many possible combinations of interactions of people, technology and media, the spaces for advocacy are multifold. ICTs and their related networks and systems not only link the so-called global culture with autonomous local concerns, but can also engender new forms of cross-border co-operations.

Consequently, women need to develop proposals and actions that anticipate many different scenarios. Issues such as the portrayal of women in electronic media, cyberspace or publicity have long ago transgressed national borders. Interactivity is not only a feature of new media but is also a trait of the global-local nexus. Actions in the local sphere are linked to global issues while actions in the global scene have repercussions on the local and the whole.

The technological and communicational divide between North and South stems from the global consolidation of an economic and social dynamic which is leading to the exclusion of the majority from access to goods, knowledge and services like communications. Defending women's right to communication and technology, therefore, is fought most acutely in those spaces where the most important aspects of world management are being decided — that is in agencies like the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Telecommunications Union.<sup>9</sup>

Civil society organisations are also experiencing a more welcome type of globalisation. ICTs are facilitating greater communication exchange and active collaboration among civil society organisations. From alternative media



groups to concerned media researchers and professionals, and from women's organisations to human rights movements and institutions, civil society organisations are becoming involved in developing proposals around the right to communicate. One example was the space created by convening the International Forum on Communication and Citizenship, which brought together a broad range of social players.<sup>10</sup>

This appropriation of technology by women must be included in the broader framework of proposals of the women's movement, which represents the main actor in upholding gender perspectives in all spheres. For the immediate future, in most places in the world, the advocacy position will be oriented towards calling for gender focus in the provision of local or national Internet connectivity services (that will make it possible to reduce the technological and communication gender gap). The women's movement is also needed in drawing up ethical, legislative and constitutional frameworks at the local level and in shaping policies at the global level that incorporate a gender ethic in the overall realm of media and communications.

Local civic initiatives in communication access can make it possible, for the first time, for those women who are excluded from communication to have access to global interactions and to participate in collective processes.

Similarly, it is important to reach out to and work with media organisations, advertisers, marketing specialists, entertainment professionals, and other media and communication practitioners. One possible area of cooperation with members of the mainstream media, communication and entertainment sectors is the development of voluntary codes of ethics.

International gatherings where reflections and analysis are generated, such as SID/UNESCO Workshops on Women and Cyberculture in 1997 and 1998<sup>11</sup>, and the Global Knowledge of 1998 and 2000<sup>12</sup> are important spaces for developing a gender focus on the discourse on ICTs. Women's organisations and feminist scholars have seized opportunities provided by such spaces to develop proposals grounded on the critical questioning of assumptions about knowledge production and women's role in ICTs.

With the ascendancy of the legitimacy of civil society organisations, and the shift in consciousness about the role of governmental and intergovernmental agencies, the UN have created venues allowing representatives of civil society direct access to policy-making processes at the global level. UN World



Conferences tackling critical issues like women's empowerment, environmental degradation, social development, population growth and human rights have been important arenas for civil society organisations' efforts to participate in and influence important global debates around development issues. The UN agencies that are particularly important to women's advocacy in ICTs in the global arena include the UNESCO, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)<sup>13</sup>, the Commission for Human Rights, the mechanisms in charge of promoting women's status like UNIFEM and INSTRAW and the various regional Economic Commissions.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Without a doubt, more discussions and debates are needed to better tackle the many issues relating to women's advocacy on ICTs. This is the first lesson we can draw from the experiences of APCWNSP. Engaging in open debate can help deepen feminist perspectives on communication and ICT issues. Equally important to exchanging views and opinions is exchanging experiences in advocacy work. This can enrich discussions about trickier issues such as state intervention in the regulation of new media, dealing with pornography and violence on the Internet, and the tension between collective good and individual privacy. Particularly urgent too is the need to increase our awareness of existing national legislations encompassing the development of ICTs.

A second lesson that comes clearly out of the Beijing +5 review process is that while it is important to understand the issues and have well-argued proposals, these in themselves are not sufficient to affect progressive policies. We also need access to the negotiating table, and we need to build alliances with other organisations interested in the same issues we are working on. And if necessary, we need to be prepared to take the negotiations off the table.

At the start of this paper, we referred to three levels or phases of empowerment. The first phase is about becoming aware that power relations can be changed. In the face of the omnipotent power of the information and communications industries, the operation of power is not always evident. This means that a huge effort is required to analyse and understand how power relations operate and how these can be effectively modified. We have learned that without broad public support, it is very hard if not impossible to make a dent in the policy arena.



The second phase of empowerment concerns the defining of who gets to the negotiating table and who defines the agenda. By and large, those who hold power in the communications and technology field are rarely interested in discussing gender issues. However there are spaces where we are invited to contribute our views and positions, while in other spaces we need to exert pressure on those who hold power in order for us to be heard. In this context, we need to know what kinds of spaces we have access to, how these spaces operate, which issues are appropriate to address in these spaces, and how we can gain presence and clout in these spaces.

The third phase involves building the power to win on key issues. We have learned that certain concessions that have been won easily have proven difficult to implement substantially. Other hard-won victories also continue to be resisted at the onset. We need to learn to develop strategies for different situations at the local, national and international levels.

With decisive action at these different levels, not only can we move closer to the goal of women's equality in the field of communication and ICTs, but communication practice itself might effectively provide more support and fewer obstacles to gender equality. ○

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Agencia Latinoamericana de Información.
- 2 A number of the ideas in this section are inspired by the "poladvtrain" exchange on Policy-advocacy training (1997). (See the gopher menu at <[www.worldlearning.org/sit/cspid/global\\_capacity.html](http://www.worldlearning.org/sit/cspid/global_capacity.html)>.)
- 3 A study by Norman Soloman of main US newspapers shows that whereas in 1995, there were references in 4,562 articles to the information superhighway and only 950 to e-commerce, by 1999 the tendency was reversed: only 842 references to the information superhighway and 20,641 to e-commerce. (Quoted in Herman. 2000)
- 4 Two documents that spearheaded proposals on ICTs for the Beijing process were those presented by ALAI (1994) and APC (1995).
- 5 The Women-Media discussion list archive is at: <<http://sdnhq.undp.org/www/women-media>>. The full report of the on-line discussion is at <<http://www.womenaction.org/sectionj.html>>. See also the Alternative Assessment of Women and Media (WomenAction: 2000), at <<http://www.womenaction.org/csw44/altrepeng.htm>>.

## The APCWNSP's First 8 Years



- 6 The Media Caucus also took tabs of the floor discussions and debates as well as the status of lobbying and negotiation efforts around media and communication issues during the UN Commission on the Status of Women in March 2000 and during UNGASS in June 2000. The caucus was co-chaired by Isis International-Manila and ALAI during the UNCSW in March 2000. During UNGASS, APCWNSP joined the two international groups in the co-coordination of the caucus.
- 7 For example, the WNSP has been a precursor within APC itself, as an example of how to approach a proposal on technology from the perspective of civil society networking initiatives.
- 8 In 17-20 April 2000, the UN convened a workshop called "High Level Expert Panel on Information and Communication Technology (ICT)."
- 9 The issues summarised in this section are mainly taken from recent consultations and proposals, notably the Women-Media global discussion sponsored by UN's Women Watch and the discussion and various reports of WomenAction.
- 10 The ITU somewhat reluctantly accepted to form a gender committee in 1997, with the presence of gender experts, on the understanding that the issue could be recognised "in a responsible yet low key way" (ITU: 1997).
- 11 International Forum on Communication and Citizenship, San Salvador, September 1998. See <[http://www.movimientos.org/foro\\_comunicacion](http://www.movimientos.org/foro_comunicacion)>. The Forum brought together about 180 people, of which more than half were from social movements.
- 12 UNESCO and the Society for International Development (SID) organised two international workshops on women, the Internet and cyberculture. The first was in March 1997 in Compostela, Spain and the second was in May 1998 in California, USA. Part of a SID/UNESCO Internet initiative called Women on the Net, the workshop brought together activists, technicians, scholars, and policy experts in the field of ICTs. Members of the APCWNSP were significantly represented in both workshops. SID/UNESCO also ran a mailing list called cyborg-I. The discussions in this list, along with the workshops resulted in the publication of the book Women@Net, a collection of anecdotal as well as theoretical reflections on women's engagement with ICTs.
- 13 Global Knowledge is an initiative created by the World Bank and other development organisations, governments, multilateral organisations and NGOs, with the purpose of fomenting creative partnerships in promoting the role of knowledge in development. It has held two international conferences, in Canada in 1998 and in Malaysia in 2000. The latter produced a document of gender proposals in relation to knowledge and ICTs (Global Knowledge Women's Forum. 2000).
- 14 WomenAction made a presentation at the High Level Segment of the July 2000 ECOSOC Meeting, focusing on ICTs (Walker: 2000).



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# *Crossing the Digital Divide*

## Converging Old and New Technologies

*Sonia Boezak*

Our need for information has grown proportionally with the increase of available information. What has not changed is the immense power that access to information gives us. The way in which we access and use that information changes daily, and it is this very change that calls for new, innovative ways in which we utilise information resources.

Since the dawn of human history networks of people have always existed as a way of getting and using information. In more recent times, a virtual, but definitely literal network, the Internet has emerged as a powerful way of linking people and vast information resources. The Internet is an open network that links governments, schools, libraries, corporations, and individuals. Anyone is welcome to use it, as long as they have a terminal or computer with the correct software and the ability to pay the costs.

As the Internet grows in reach and power, so too does our own awareness of the interconnectedness of things. The Internet as broadcasting medium, for example, is not separate from other broadcasting media. Radio networks, television networks — even newspaper networks — do not operate in isolation. People and agencies within these networks have been connected to each other by a range of different means, the most apparent of these means being the telephone. Users and operators of different forms of media are recognising the possibilities offered by the Internet to increase their audiences and strengthen their networks. And so, strengthen the communities they serve.

The electronic networking possibilities offered by the Internet has the potential to foster linkages between organisations, structures, projects and communities. Geographical and national barriers can be broken. The Internet challenges the tension between local and global and makes information available that we would not otherwise have access to.



For media practitioners, the Internet can enhance their role and effectiveness by facilitating access to peer support as well as direct exchange of views and experiences with other media workers, and by offering an alternate route to publishing materials and promoting local, regional and global broadcasts.

### DEMOCRATISING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

There are many examples of electronic networks being created to share information and to repackage information. Journalists have increasingly become more frustrated by the lack of access to new technologies. In Africa, especially, there is a chronic lack of resources available for community-based journalists. The combination of old and new information technologies like telecommunications, broadcasting, the Internet and satellite are opening more possibilities for both users and receivers of these media.

Using information and communication technologies in the media has presented both opportunities and challenges. Electronic communication tools offer a lower cost of entry for people who want access to a means to communicate. With communication taken off the hands of big governments, there is greater potential to promote and enhance democratic mechanisms for participation in governance and citizenship.

When we identify a country as being "poor" we are no longer simply speaking in terms of its natural resources or its industrial or military power. More and more, we are referring to its access to international information, and its utilisation of local resources and knowledge. In the context of this "information society", information and communication technology (ICT) and particularly the Internet, undeniably plays a pivotal role in social and economic development and in promoting the participation of citizens.

This technology gives social groups the opportunity to enter and carve a place for themselves in the world of information exchange - be it cultural, political and economic information, as well as scientific and technical information.

At the same time, however, ICT is also risky in terms of economic and social development, because it has helped widen the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor. It is this challenge that is especially



important for developing countries. In Africa, for example, there is such a lack of access to information in large parts of the continent that is has been referred to as an information and digital wasteland.

The Internet allows us to see the chasms, but at the same time gives us the opportunity to break through a divide. How this medium is utilised and applied is what makes the difference.

Unchecked and unchallenged, the profit-driven and fast-paced development of a resource like the Internet, can become yet another example of the existing disparity in access to information media and telecommunications. Whether the Internet will remain true to its beginnings as a radical way of freely sharing information and knowledge or whether it will end up being a playground for profit-seeking and market-hungry enterprises will depend to a very great extent on how effectively previously excluded communities will be able to assert themselves in the digital era.

## **MIXING THE OLD AND THE NEW**

When we think of mixing old and new technologies, the first thing that comes to mind is combining radio and the Internet, although it is far from being the only combination possible.

Various community-centred media organisations and networks have started to develop creative combinations of the use of radio and the Internet. Such initiatives offer pointers for women's organisations and networks interested in creating effective ways of bridging the digital divide.

### **World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters**

“(The Internet’s) efficiency, quality, coverage and low information distribution and exchange costs could make it into a support tool of physical and virtual connections for the community radio station network, and therefore a support tool for its promotion of development and the participation of citizens.”

Thus reads a note from the Website of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters or AMARC. This global network of community-fo-



cused radio communicators has been experimenting and innovating ways to effectively deploy radio and the Internet to strengthen “the connections between the various points of the community radio station network.” But in addition to this, AMARC also sees the opportunity offered by the convergence of radio and the Internet in terms of diversifying and adding quality to the information being accessed by local communities.

Over the years, AMARC has developed a strong women’s networking program through its Women’s International Network (WIN). WIN is a network of women communicators working to ensure women’s right to communicate within and through the community radio network. Some of the principles of this network include women’s empowerment, gender equity, and a general improvement in the condition and position of women worldwide. WIN is working to promote women’s access to all levels of running and managing, to provide training programmes and production exchanges among women communicators locally and globally, and to challenge gender stereotypes being reproduced by media all around the world.

To accomplish these goals, WIN works with partners in different countries.

“Women grab the microphones”, for example, is a project involving ten different radio stations from all over the world. Women broadcasters involved in this project work on joint production of broadcast materials about the general subject of women’s rights. The collaboration is enhanced through exchange visits of the participants.

AMARC has also embarked on “Women Online”, a transnational project that aims to get women gain new skills in information technology through the development of training materials. Women involved in this project work together online, using electronic mailing lists.

Complementing “Women Online” is the project called “Permanent Waves”, a transnational effort to provide women constant and reliable access to training resources in new communication technologies. AMARC’s main role in this project is the dissemination of the materials produced by its partners through the Website of WIN, ensuring ‘permanently’ open ‘airwaves’.

AMARC is also involved with a project called “Voices without Frontiers – Radios Against Racism.” This project works with local and community radio stations to combat racism and to support migrant, refugee, black and ethnic



minority broadcasters. The Voices without Frontiers Network has a Website that contains information on the project itself, as well as sound files, resources and links for broadcasters. In addition, this network has created a news service called "Griot". In West African traditions, "Griot" is the traditional wandering news-teller, musician and storehouse of local knowledge. Only one year old, this project is already making it possible for radio stations from all over Africa to be able to speak to each other in a way that had never before been possible. [see: <http://www.amarc.org/vsf/>]

### **Women'sNet**

Women'sNet was organised to enable the South African women's movement to capitalise on the enormous potential presented by new communication technologies for advancing women's struggles. Women'sNet aims to assist women's organisations and advocates of gender equality a way to network with similarly-oriented organisations; to reach a wider audience; and to increase their capacity in social and policy advocacy through training, access to policymakers and a platform for disseminating views and opinions about critical issues.

To achieve these goals, Women'sNet works to make information resources and the technologies for the production and distribution of such resources accessible to more women, particularly those who have been historically disadvantaged and excluded.

This was also the rationale behind the community radio project which Women'sNet recently embarked in. This pilot project was conducted in a small, but densely populated province of South Africa. It aimed to increase gender content in community radio stations and to develop the capacity of women's organisations and advocates to generate gender content for news and programming on community radio and to deal with media. In addition, the community radio project also aimed to create an electronic network of professionals in both community and commercial radio as well as among gender and women activists who will work on the development of a Web-based clearinghouse of radio content on women's issues.

The project commenced with a workshop of women activists and advocates of gender equality aimed at developing their capacity to deal with media. Another workshop was conducted with community radio programmers



and journalists joining the activists. After a series of activities to encourage the participants to get to know each other, the workshop was broken into teams of two participants — one community radio worker and one activist. The teams were then sent out to the local communities to develop news and features programs for radio broadcast. The remarkable radio programs produced by the teams were used to inaugurate the Women'sNet Radio Exchange.

At the end of the workshop, the participants drafted their own strategies for working together and forging more lasting partnerships. These strategies included monitoring events in communities, scheduling regular interviews or briefings about gender issues in the community, and sharing resources.

At the onset of the project the participants were consulted about their information needs. The results of these consultations provided a starting point for the information architecture of the planned Web-based clearinghouse for radio content on women's issues. [see <http://radio.womensnet.org.za>]

The main features of the Website include: a database of searchable audio features, clips and news; links to gender resources for "radio on the Internet"; and a help section that includes information about how to get connected, where to get the right software, and how to do rebroadcast on a radio station. The news clips are obtained from a weekly live broadcast done by the South African Community Radio Information Network. In addition, the site contains some practical ways of making radio interesting.

Visitors to the site or members of the radio exchange can also broadcast their own programmes to the Internet by uploading them to the site. This feature makes the site doubly useful.

The success of Women'sNet community radio project lies in its basic design that allows participants to contribute to the direction of the project as well as the definition of what they need as providers and users of information.

As a result of the Women'sNet community radio project, the donor agency is now investigating the feasibility of creating smaller community radio networking projects in various parts of South Africa. This step is designed to allow radio stations to determine their specific needs and share information that is relevant and necessary in their communities. In one province, for example, stations have expressed the need to set up a news network that is based solely on the use of electronic mail. News from around the region are



sent in digest form daily by e-mail. On the other hand, stations that have been operating for a longer period in another province require the use of an e-mail resource centre. The digest of the mail includes information on networking, management, editing and whatever the daily requirements of any given radio station may be. In addition, they require the use of an FTP server to archive all of this information. Both of these networks will also be utilising the Women'sNet radio exchange Website to upload and download sound and text files that they wish to share with a broader community.

### **Feminist Internet Radio Endeavour**

The 1995 UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, proved to be a catalyst for many women's networks crossing geographical and political boundaries. Since then, various networks have formed around the Beijing Platform for Action and the subsequent review process.

During the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session (UNGASS) on the Beijing Platform for Action in June 2000, the voices of women from all over the world were broadcast live daily via the Internet from the United Nations in New York. This was the work of the organisation Feminist Internet Radio Endeavour or FIRE. Using a combination of traditional radio and personal computers, FIRE has been working to keep information and communication technology in the hands of those who are creating the news, thus enabling women to tell their own stories and create their own histories as the events are happening. In addition to the Webcasts during the UNGASS, FIRE also trained women and girls from around the world to do live Internet broadcasting. (see <http://www.fire.cr.or>)

FIRE was created on May 1, 1991 as a shortwave radio program. From then on, FIRE has grown into an international radio programme broadcasting from the shortwave radio station Radio for Peace International located on the campus of the University for Peace in El Rodeo, Costa Rica. After seven years of constant and active consecutive presence in the world of shortwave radio, FIRE hooked up on the Internet to enhance its capacity to reach other audience groups, to promote the presence of women in media, to combat sexist images of women in media, and to contribute to the strengthening of women's media networks.

## The APCWNSP's First 8 Years



Using different kinds of technologies and combining these to create innovative content and to reach more people are as important to empowerment as working with peers. Such a strategy works to remove the limitations of isolation and to encourage greater collaboration across sectors, geographies and divides — traditional as well as emerging. The small community of radio stations that have chosen to use electronic networks according to their specific needs, now also feel empowered to lobby multinationals for advertising and to negotiate rates with municipal governments. Equally important, combining a mass media like radio with an interactive media like the Internet presents a real opportunity for more women to become both users and producers of their own information and knowledge. ○

# *WomenAction Network and the BPFA Review*

## Mustering a Global Women's Information and Communication Campaign

*Liz Probert*

WomenAction has been a unique attempt to network with women's information and communications organisations on a worldwide scale to broaden women's participation in the five year on review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). It has been an extremely interesting and successful project and there are many aspects of it which could be useful to other women's networks. The purpose of this article is to outline the activities, successes and failures of the project to serve as examples for future projects of this type.

### **HOW WOMENACTION WAS FORMED**

In March 1999 the first Preparatory Commission meeting for the BPFA Review (henceforth Beijing+5) was held in New York under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). Three NGO working groups were convened to discuss the Beijing+5 overall framework, NGO access to information and venues for intervention and the importance of coming up with NGO alternative (or shadow) reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

At the same time, global and regional women's information and communication networks organised a workshop titled Global Communications Forum. Many NGOs were also present in the forum, and the discussion focused on how the organisations and networks could keep in touch after the PrepCom and collaborate in order to widen women's participation in the Beijing+5 review process. Out of this forum the WomenAction 2000 network was initially planned.

Present at that Global Communications Forum were the following representatives of women's organisations and information networks, who formed the initial steering committee of WomenAction:



Lin Pugh: Information Sharing Programme Manager, International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (The Netherlands)

Anne S. Walker: Director, International Women's Tribune Centre (USA)

Karen Banks: Coordinator, Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (UK)

Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla: Director, Environment and Development in the Third World/Synergy, Gender and Development (Senegal)

Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng: Director, Isis Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Uganda)

Chat Garcia Ramilo: Coordinator, Asian Women's Resource Exchange; and Programme Manager, Isis International-Manila (Philippines)

Yukika Matsumoto: Board Member, JCA/NET and fem-net (Japan)

Peregrine Wood: Association for Progressive Communications, Women's Networking Support Programme (Canada)

Maureen James: Programs and Projects Manager, Association for Progressive Communications (Canada)

### **Working Online**

An electronic mailing list was set up in order to facilitate the organisation and coordination of the WomenAction network. Through the experience of women's networks such as the APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APCWNSP) and Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC), both founding members of WomenAction, using electronic mailing list was decided as the best way for a global initiative to strategise online. New women were invited to join the list through the participating networks. This mailing list was not only the workspace of the WomenAction Working Group. It was virtually the Working Group of WomenAction.

A proposal was drawn up to be able to raise funds and other resources to put the plans into action. The proposed activities outlined in the proposal were:

- 1) Training of regional facilitators who would be responsible for setting up working groups in every region and for participating in the regional and global online working groups for the Beijing+5 review;



- 2) Training of Website construction and maintenance people who would develop regional Websites for the collection, sharing and linking of information on the review process;
- 3) Development of a global Website that would serve as a central site for the collection, sharing and linking of information on the review process;
- 4) Building strategic alliances with women's information and communication networks to repackage and disseminate alternative information using radio, video and print, to craft national and shadow reports and to hold electronic dialogues on the review process; and
- 5) Development of a network of national and regional animators who can mobilise, network and liaise with women's organisations, UN Agencies and other organisations participating in the BPFA Review Process.

The proposal was first sent to UN's Women Watch which kindly agreed to fund a large proportion of the proposed activities. Other funding agencies were also approached later on to get resources to cover some of the other activities.

One of the first tasks of the Working Group (WomenAction) was to appoint a coordinator who could take these activities forward. It was necessary to hire someone since all of the women involved had other jobs that left them little time to actively work on getting WomenAction off the ground.

A job description was drafted, discussed and finalised using the mailing list. The mailing list was then used to organise and prepare for the regional and global training workshops that would give the members of WomenAction the necessary skills to complete the outlined activities. The organisations and networks participating in the different regions identified trainers and participants. Proposals were drafted and discussed online and new mailing lists were set up for trainers and participants to discuss preparations for the workshops.

One of the main issues which all of the WomenAction mailing lists have had to face is that of ease and quality of participation. Many of the women on the list have a lot of work to do, and are not always able to cope with the



volume of e-mail on the list or to participate fully in the online discussions. List facilitation has been all-important to ensure that the discussions are kept on track, that messages are easily archived by subject line, and that discussions and important questions are summarised in order to encourage greater participation.

## REGIONAL TRAINING

The main objective of the regional trainings was to enhance the capability of organisations and networks working in the different Beijing+5 to build regional Websites for the dissemination of information, to conduct online consultations with women's groups in the regions, and to prepare regional alternative reports on the status of the BPFA.

The workshops and training sessions were different for each region for these were grounded on conditions and needs specific to each of the regions and the networks leading the training sessions. Nevertheless, the experiences of all the regional networks show how workshops and trainings can be used to broaden participation in the review process.

### Asia

The first training workshop was held in June 1999 in Asia. The Asian Women's Electronic Networking Training Workshop (WENT) — as the Asian training was called — provided a comprehensive model that was used by some of the other regions in organising their own training workshops. The workshop was held at Sookmyung University in Seoul, South Korea. The workshop organiser was the Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC), one of the founding members of WomenAction. AWORC was able to raise funds for the workshop using a detailed proposal.

The goals of the Asian training were:

1. To train women's information providers in the use of group communication and web authoring tools to be able to provide meaningful Internet-related activities of their organisations, networks and localities;

2. To develop and increase the level of co-operation among women's information providers and existing women's information networks in the region;
3. To promote greater sharing of information sources towards enhancing the promotion of a regional information network on the review process of the Beijing Platform For Action;
4. To promote the appropriate use of information and communication technology in the regional women's movement; and
5. To train women's information providers who will be able to assist women in the use of Internet services and tools.

The course was a mixture of lectures and demonstrations with emphasis on hands-on practical learning and group work.

A mailing list was set up to facilitate preparations by the participants and trainers. The mailing list continued after the workshop as a means for the participants to exchange information about the Beijing+5 review process.

The Asian WENT was such a success that AWORC held another one in June 2000. The resources that were developed as training materials have been shared with other members of WomenAction and provide very useful practical information on how to design and build Websites and how to use mailing lists to work online. A regional Website focusing on the Beijing+5Process in Asia was produced as a result of the workshop. (editor's note: Preparations are underway for a third workshop in June 2001).

## **Africa**

Fifteen women from nine different African countries came together in September 1999 for a workshop at Women'sNet in Johannesburg, South Africa to build an African Website focusing on Beijing+5. This workshop was also fundraised directly by the African women's network.

The goals of the workshop were:

1. To develop an African women's network committed to sharing and developing Beijing+5 information in a Website; and



2. To build the capacity of participants to create Websites for their own organisations.

Similar to the Asian workshop, a mailing list was also set up to facilitate preparations for the training. The electronic mailing list was carried on after the workshop as a means for the dissemination of information among participants on Beijing+5 in both French and English. The list also became a venue for sharing ideas and technical knowhow during the development of the Website.

The African Beijing+5 Website was developed by dividing the participants into content and site design teams. The content team discussed and planned out the sections, resources and work requirements for developing the Site. The Site Design team planned the overall structure and look of the site. Between the two teams, they were able to produce an informative and attractive Website in both French and English, which has enabled African women's groups to work together on the Beijing+5 review process in the region.

### **Europe**

The European WomenAction training workshop was held in September 1999 at GreenNet in London, England. The workshop was held in order to train the members of European WomenAction on how to design and build a regional Website to broaden European participation in the Beijing+5 process.

The workshop can be divided into three areas of skills learning: basic html and Web design, content and Site management, and technical requirement. For the basic html and Web design training sessions, the training team from GreenNet used resources and materials developed by other women's organisations. The workshop was divided into two work teams. While one team focused on discussing what sections and resources should be included in the site, the other team concentrated on the technical skills required to set up search engines and scripts.

Various Web tools were demonstrated and discussed as possible additions to the site, such as discussion forums, calendars and events listings. At the end of the workshop, the participants were able to come up with a strategy for setting up the site. Roles were also assigned to the different members of the team who will work to develop the site. Aside from assigning those



who be responsible for content gathering and technical management of the site, an overall Website manager was also appointed.

After the workshop, site development was facilitated through an electronic mailing list.

## **Latin America and Caribbean**

Last but not the least of the different regional trainings was the Latin American and Caribbean workshop. It was held in in January 2000 in Quito, Ecuador and was hosted by the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI) — Area Mujeres. Fourteen participants representing various women's organisations in the region participated in the training. The goals of the workshop were:

1. To update knowledge of strategic approaches to new communication technologies;
2. To design a common communication strategy for the Latin American and Caribbean Beijing+5 review process;
3. To build collaboration among the different (information and communication) media towards promoting leadership of women's initiatives in the Beijing+5 review process; and
4. To update the proposals relating to Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action and come up with joint initiatives for their prioritisation in the Beijing+5 review process.

Each of the organisations that participated in the training workshop presented their activities in with regards to the Beijing+5 review process and the WomenAction network. A work plan for the region was drafted following an exhaustive discussion about the Beijing+5 review process and the issues relating to the Women and Media section of the BPFA. Two crucial components of the regional work plan are the strategy for action and the communications mechanisms which will be used to support this strategy.

The Website Mujeres Acción was created for the region to serve as a bridge between the global and regional process, and to make it easy for women in Latin America and the Caribbean to access online information related to the regional Beijing+5 process.



## GLOBAL WOMEN'S ELECTRONIC NETWORKING TRAINING

The first face-to-face meeting of the participants of the WomenAction network happened at the Sookmyung University in Seoul, South Korea. The occasion was the Global Women's Electronic Networking Training (GWENT) in September 1999.

The objectives of the workshop were:

1. To build the WomenAction Network through training, and sharing of skills and strategies in online facilitation and Website construction; and
2. To develop medium- and long-term objectives and strategies for the global review of BPFA's Section J and the global electronic information and communication campaign for the whole Beijing+ 5 review.

To achieve these objectives, the GWENT participants were divided into three tracks; Web, Online and Section J. The Web track focused on strategies and skills for Web design and maintenance. The Online track discussed skills and strategies in working online and running electronic mailing lists. Strategies for lobbying on the Women and Media section of the BPFA were tackled in the Section J track.

Although there were track leaders who facilitated the discussions, all participants were encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences with the group, which further enriched the training.

A number of plenary sessions were held to map out WomenAction's overall strategy and to plan its activities. At the end of the workshop, the participants agreed on a mission statement and coordination structure. They also decided to expand the membership of the steering committee to include more representatives from the different regions as well as women leading the different initiatives of WomenAction.

## GLOBAL WEBSITE

At the Seoul workshop the web track agreed to form a mailing list to collaborate on building the global Website. The Web track also led in defining WomenAction's strategy for building its global Website. A crucial element of



this strategy was the formation of a Web team to take charge of the production of the Website. Rather than assigning just one person, the Web track pointed out that a team approach is more compatible with the collaborative spirit in WomenAction. Thus a web team consulting directly with the bigger Web Working Group and the Steering Committee was constituted.

In practice, this team approach proved quite difficult as all the women involved were very busy. The availability of funds to support those who were working directly to produce the Site ensured that targets were met. However it was very difficult to get feedback from the bigger working group since most of its members were involved in other activities for WomenAction as well as in their own full time jobs.

Through a mailing list, members of the Web Working Group were consulted at each stage of the development of the site, and useful feedback and discussion did take place, especially in the early stages. A good example of this was the process of decision-making around the logo of WomenAction. Several design treatments were submitted to the Web Working Group whose members vigorously discussed and debated on the merits of each of the designs. The final decision was made through votation in the Web Working Group and the Steering Committee. The winning design has since been used for all WomenAction materials and has helped create a distinct visual identity for the network.

There were other challenges that arose during the development of the global site which proved insurmountable. One such challenge was posed by the initial plan to create a search engine which would be able to search the contents of all the regional sites as well as the global site. Since all the sites are hosted on different servers around the world, this plan proved to be quite

### **Mission Statement**

To be a global information, communication and media network that enables NGOs to actively engage in the Beijing +5 review process with the long term goal of women's empowerment, with a special focus on women and media.

### **Coordination Structure**

WomenAction is a loose network with the following working groups and decision-making venues:

1. Working groups for each of the following concerns:
  - Section J (Website Content, Alternative Report, Models, Strategic List)
  - Website (facilitators, content, technical)
  - Fundraising (proposals, contacts, budgets, visits)
  - Media Outreach: press releases, press lists, journalists, CONGO, other groups
2. Steering committee
3. Coordinator



technically complex to achieve. This would have been a very useful addition to the global Site. Unfortunately the Web team did not have sufficient time and resources to devote in implementing this type of search engine.

Overall, the global Website has been a success. It has given greater access to resources on the BPFA and has helped increase traffic to the various regional sites. Web statistics have shown that women around the world have accessed the site for information on Beijing+5 and have used the global site as a portal leading to the regional sites.

### **ONLINE CONSULTATION ON WOMEN AND MEDIA**

Upon the request of the UN Women Watch, WomenAction managed and facilitated a global online consultation on women and media. Women from around the world participated in the online consultation which yielded rich insights about the many issues confronting women in relation to media access, ownership, and gender representation. The final report of the consultation proved to be a very useful resource for the global and regional alternative reports on Section J. The online consultation also revealed how women approach the issues relating to information and communication technologies and their impact on women.

### **GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE REPORT ON WOMEN AND MEDIA**

Another crucial work of WomenAction was the crafting of a global WomenAction's strategy for the global alternative report involved gathering together and synthesising different alternative reports from around the world. The development of regional reports was done in different ways, according to the resources available to the different organisations and networks involved in this work.

WomenAction was able to raise some funds for the development of the regional and global alternative reports. Via a mailing list, WomenAction circulated guidelines for writing the reports, and invited writers interested in working on the reports. The project manager for this activity was the Women's Networking Support Programme coordinator, who oversaw the process and



made sure that each regional report was submitted in time for the write up of the global report. Isis International-Manila was invited to write the global alternative report.

The alternative report from Asia, which was written by Isis International-Manila proved to be a model for the other regions. Isis received funding from the UN to carry out consultations on Women and Media which ensured a relatively rich base of resources and a greater number of local and national and sub-regional reports to work with.

The European report, on the other hand, was more difficult to produce because there were less national and local reports on which to ground the regional alternative reports. NGOs in Europe were concentrating on other areas of the Beijing Platform for Action which was surprising for a region where Information and Communication Technology has become so important. (Based on UN definitions, the European region includes North America.) To make up for the dearth of materials for the European alternative report, the archives of the online consultation were used to sift out all contributions from the European region. This information was used alongside the experience of members of the European WomenAction, and alternative reports which were produced in the region.

The crafting of the global alternative report met difficult challenges. One of the major gaps was the absence of reports covering some regions like the Middle East. Because of this, it was felt that to call the report a Global Report as originally intended was not acceptable. The final alternative report was renamed a "worldwide report," and the areas which the report covered were listed. The report has been a very useful resource.

## **44TH COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

The 44th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was held at the UN in New York in March 2000. WomenAction sent a team of women to New York to work on three main activities. These activities included running an Internet café or public Internet access, producing daily news bulletin about the ongoing CSW in print and also uploading to the WomenAction Website, and lobbying UN delegates and other NGOs on the Women and Media section of the Beijing Platform.



The Internet café provided access to e-mail, Web and basic computer facility for women attending the UNCSW. WomenAction members provided technical support and assistance to users. This enabled women to send information back to their organisations around the world, and to receive information that they needed for their lobby work. Women of all ages and nationalities came to the Internet café.

The team in charge of the daily news bulletin consisted of an editor, writers, layout person and html person. The design for the print bulletin had been prepared in advance by Les Pénélopes from the European WomenAction. The bulletin was divided into sections. Decisions on what materials to use and where to place them came mainly from the editor. At the start of each day, members of the team met to discuss the day's issue. A longer weekend edition was produced at the end of each week.

It was felt afterwards that the procedure adapted by the daily news team did not encourage the best use of the resources and talent WomenAction members had to offer. The daily meetings of the team were inefficient. Instead of discussing the priority issues, activities and sessions that should be covered by the team; the morning sessions had each writer reporting on what caucuses they planned to attend.

Weaknesses in coordination were also pointed out. Some quieter members of the daily news team felt left out. Some of the regions also felt under-represented in the newsletter, with their experiences in producing similar bulletins in the past not properly valued. These problems were mainly a result of the failure of the planning sessions to ensure the inclusion of more information that was relevant to each region. (The UNCSW also coincided with the Global Knowledge conference in Malaysia, the reason why WomenAction members who were in New York were mainly European, creating an imbalance in regional representation.)

The WomenAction team in New York also encountered problems relating editorial statements that were questioned by members of the network as well as by other organisations. Prior to UNCSW, WomenAction did not have an explicit editorial policy. As the network consisted of a large number of diverse women's organisations, it was felt that the only subject WomenAction could really speak as a whole was Women and Media. However, certain issues of the daily bulletin carried editorial statements on certain other issues of the

women's movement and on the UNCSW in general. Because of this problem, it was decided that the network should agree on an editorial policy before reporting on the UN General Assembly Special Session on BPPA in June 2000.

Coordination and logistical work also proved quite challenging due to the length of the UNCSW itself. Many of the WomenAction members who went to New York had difficulty staying for the whole three-week duration of the UN meeting. To cope with this situation, the co-ordinator organised a relay system wherein an outgoing team member is supposed to turn over her role to an incoming team member. However this system also proved difficult to implement consistently. A case in point is the daily news bulletin. The editor changed from week to week, making it difficult to keep consistency in the quality of editorial work and to pass on experiences learned from one week to the next.

Despite these problems however, the WomenAction team in New York kept its collective nose to the grind. Information was delivered to many women around the world who were unable to attend the CSW meeting. All the editions of the daily news bulletin were posted on to the Website and to a mailing list with hundreds of subscribers from around the world.

Members of WomenAction who were directly involved in lobbying took a leading role in the Women and Media Caucus. They lobbied for changes in the joint NGO working document on Women and Media. They also distributed copies of the worldwide report on Section J in English, French and Spanish to members of the caucus as well as to some UN delegates. These documents were also made available through the WomenAction Website.

Overall, WomenAction did a lot of important work at the UNCSW. Through the daily news bulletin, the provision of Internet facilities to NGO delegates, and the active lobbying on Women and Media; the overall profile of WomenAction was raised, and information was spread more widely to those outside New York.



## PREPARATIONS FOR SPECIAL SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Soon after the UNCSW, the WomenAction's steering committee began working on a media strategy for the UN General Assembly Special Session on the BPFA (UNGASS). Ideas and suggestions were solicited from members of WomenAction through the various mailing lists. For the UNGASS, the WomenAction decided to come up with daily newspaper similar to the news bulletin produced during UNCSW but longer and containing more detailed information. The main distribution channels for the bulletin as well as for other information feeds were the WomenAction Website and mailing lists. Interactive Internet TV broadcasts were also targeted. An editorial committee was also formed to discuss and write a coherent editorial policy for the various publications being planned by WomenAction. The steering committee also made sure that all regions were represented in the editorial committee.

Because the UNGASS was shorter than the UNCSW, more WomenAction members were able to stay for the whole duration of the activity. The steering committee anticipated that coordination and logistical work for UNGASS would be less complex than the one required during the UNCSW in March 2000. Nevertheless, the committee decided to assign a liaison person working alongside the overall coordinator to make sure that the needs of all the participating organisations and individual women will be met, enabling them to contribute more effectively to the various activities of WomenAction.

A small working group was also formed to work out a strategy to make all the different media activities work together to be able to reach the most number of women possible around the world. The strategy required WomenAction to work with other groups on areas where the network lacked expertise. For example, WomenAction worked with a communications consortium organised by the NGO Hosting Committee for the UNGASS to do outreach to mainstream media.

## **WOMENACTION AT THE UNITED NATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPECIAL SESSION**

The UNGASS was held in New York in June 2000. Women activists from around the world came to New York to participate in NGO activities and to gather information to send back to their countries. WomenAction secured a space in the UN Church Centre for its various media and communication activities as well as those of other collaborating organisations.

The main efforts of the WomenAction team were directed toward producing the daily newspaper for print and electronic distribution, running the Internet café for NGO delegates, and coordinating the Women and Media caucus's efforts to effect substantive revisions in the Outcomes Document of the UNGASS.

Some member organisations of WomenAction, either on their own or in collaboration with the network ran their own media and communication activities. The Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE), for example, worked with WomenAction to broadcast each morning live Internet radio programs in Spanish and English. These Internet radio feeds were picked up by community radio stations. Les Pénélopes, a feminist organisation in France worked with WomenAction in Europe to transmit interactive TV programs from the conference in French and English. Isis International-Manila, a founding member of WomenAction, brought together in New York writers from different women's organisations around the world for training in media campaign by producing daily reportage and feature articles about the UNGASS and the activities of participating NGOs.

All these activities, centred physically on two floors of the UN Church Centre, created a lively hub of women working with many different tools but working towards the same objectives of spreading relevant and increasing women's participation. The sight of so many skilled women working with technology impressed many visitors to the Internet café. Both the FIRE and Les Pénélopes Internet broadcasts were shown in the Internet café using an LCD projector, in between live Webcasts from the UNGASS itself. These Internet broadcasts were very popular.

The activities were carefully coordinated and planned, taking into account the lessons learned from the campaign at the UNCSW. Participants during the



final evaluation session said that that they felt the UNGASS campaign of WomenAction had been a success.

## SUCSESSES AND CHALLENGES

The WomenAction network began as an idea conceived by a few women to use information and communication technologies to widen participation in the review of the Beijing Platform for Action and to work together to create a strong UN lobby for women's access to these technologies. It is incredible that a worldwide network of women was able to organise and carry out so many different activities, almost entirely through a virtual space. From the time WomenAction was first discussed in March 1999 up to UNGASS in June 2000, there had been only one face-to-face meeting. Practically all the coordination, discussions, logistical preparations, monitoring and evaluation had been done online using mailing lists and Websites.

On this account alone, WomenAction can already be considered an extremely positive example of how information and communication technologies can help the women's organisations to collaborate more and to achieve more. WomenAction had gone from being just a thought into becoming a worldwide network in just over one year. More importantly, WomenAction's activities made it possible for women who had no direct access to the UNCSW and the UN General Assembly to be able to receive timely and relevant information about processes in these international arenas, and to contribute to the strengthening of women's advocacies in the whole BPFA review process.

Of the challenges that confronted WomenAction, one of the most critical had been issues regarding representation. In several occasions some members of WomenAction had raised questions regarding regional representation in the network. Some regions, it was felt had stronger presence than others. There was also concern that women from the North or the developed part of the world had a bigger voice in the steering committee.

These issues were dealt with through the mailing lists accessible to all members of WomenAction. In this way, all the participating organisations had the same opportunity to contribute to the discussion of the issues.



Having online workspaces accessible to all participating organisations promotes an even level “playing field” in terms of the formal structures for decision-making and participation. Nevertheless, certain realities had worked to place limits on the degree of equality in representation within WomenAction. Some regions for example, have more established networks than others. Some organisations have more resources than others. Some women have more time than others. These meant that some regions or organisations had been more active than others in their participation at different points of WomenAction’s year-long campaign.

Still the equality of participation from the regions could have been improved by allocating funds to pay for time spent working on WomenAction activities. Having a paid regional co-ordinator in each region could have enhanced parity in the capacity of the regions to participate consistently in all the activities of WomenAction.

Another major challenge had been the difficulty of reaching out to networks in the Middle Eastern region. True there are plenty of women’s groups and networks in this region, but very few of them were participating in the Beijing+5 process. Through some women from the Middle East region who participated in the UNCSW, WomenAction was able to get information sites on women’s issues in the region. WomenAction was able to create links to these sites from its Website. Still, women from the Middle Eastern region could have participated in the crafting of the alternative reports and in the online consultations had WomenAction been able to contact groups from the region earlier in the BPPA campaign.

In any global initiative language is always going to be a crucial issue, with translation work being a key undertaking. WomenAction has been more successful than most at this. Major documents and resources on the global Website are served in English, French and Spanish. Many of the regional sites are bilingual: the African site is in French and English, and the Latin American and Caribbean site uses mainly Spanish with some English. The daily news feeds during the UNCSW and the UNGASS were produced in English, French and Spanish.

More could have been done had there been more funds for translation work. For example, there was a suggestion to get documents translated into Arabic and other languages that are also widely spoken around the world.



Documents were translated into Spanish and French without difficulty because there were many French and Spanish speakers inside WomenAction. They not only pressed for translation, but actively worked to get documents translated. WomenAction members serving as translators during the UNCSW worked hard into the evening to ensure that each issue of the daily news bulletin was available in English, Spanish and French. Perhaps the main lesson here is: A global network's capacity to pull down the language barriers rests to a large extent on the commitment of participating organisations to work hard to do the actual translation.

WomenAction has strived to support and contribute to the work of the participating organisations and regional networks. For example, there was concern at first among the established regional networks that the global Website might take credit for the work done in the regional level. Much care was given to stress the autonomy and integrity of the initiatives of all the participating organisations and regional networks. In the case of the WomenAction Website, a mailing list of participants involved in the maintenance and development of national, regional and global Websites allowed information and skills to be shared among the members of WomenAction. This enabled each participant to benefit from the experiences of others. The participants responsible for the global Website were also able to get a sense of what was being done in the regional sites. On the whole, the WomenAction Website served as a portal leading people to the various regional sites, thus increasing the global visibility of local and regional sites. ○



### 10 Points for Global Women's Information and Communication Technology Networks

WomenAction was organised for a specific purpose and within a specific set of external and internal conditions. The following "tips" are lessons learned by APCWNSP from its active involvement in the WomenAction. They are being offered not as a set of universal guidelines, but rather as a set of possible reference points for future global ICT networking initiatives.

#### 1. On Information

- Research your subject., Find as many useful resources and case studies as you can. Look at what others have done in order to learn from their mistakes and their successes.
- Train the women participating in your project. Share skills between them in order to give them the necessary technical and organisational skills to complete the project, and to help their development as skilled members of a network.
- Draw up an effective information dissemination strategy using all forms of distribution available, including mainstream and alternative media.
- Keep all the members of your network aware of what is going on with regular consultations and reports from smaller working groups, and give them opportunities for feedback in case something goes wrong.

#### 2. On Communication

- Use mailing lists to keep in touch with your network, creating both general and more specific lists for smaller working groups on activities

such as fundraising or organising training workshops.

- Reach out to other women's networks who may have expertise in other areas, which would make collaboration useful. This will increase the reach and potential of your project.
- Include a budget for translation in your funding proposal, and use as many languages as you can to ensure that as many women as possible will have the opportunity to work with you or benefit from your project.

#### 3. On Technology

- Form alliances with ICT organisations that may be able to help with hosting lists and Websites by providing technology and access for training workshops and advice on online work.
- Use new technology alongside older technology to spread your message. Even in areas where access to the Internet is limited, information can often be downloaded from women's information centres and passed on to those without access.
- Plan and set up a Website. Use the existing skills or train women within your network to create a site that is yours, rather than outsourcing it to a design company. ▀

# *APCWNSP*

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

### **WHAT IS THE APC WOMEN'S NETWORKING SUPPORT PROGRAMME?**

We are an international network of individual women and women's organisations promoting gender equality in the design, implementation, access and use of ICTs (information and communications technology) and in the policy decisions and frameworks that regulate them.

### **WHAT IS THE MISSION OF THE PROGRAMME?**

We engage in research, training, information, and support activities in the field of ICT policy, skills-sharing in the access and use of ICT, and women's network-building.

### **WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THE PROGRAMME?**

- ▶ to promote the consideration and incorporation of gender in ICT policy-making bodies and forums;
- ▶ to initiate and implement research activities in the field of gender and ICT;
- ▶ to advance the body of knowledge, understanding, and skills in the field of gender and ICT by implementing training activities;
- ▶ to facilitate access to information resources in the field of gender and ICT;



### WHAT DOES THE PROGRAMME DO?<sup>1</sup>

During the past seven or eight years, the Programme has implemented a diverse range of activities designed to respond to our mission and goals. These activities have tended to be 'clustered' around five main areas of work;

- ▶ Policy and advocacy
- ▶ Research and evaluation
- ▶ Information facilitation
- ▶ Developing Training methodologies and materials
- ▶ Support for emerging national and regional internet based networks

Below are examples of activities APCWNSP has either initiated or been actively involved in:

- ▶ APCWNSP ran an onsite electronic communication facility to support women's NGOs and women participating in the 1995 UN World Conference. Prior to and during the World Conference on Women, the programme provided information facilitation and onsite training and outreach, and successfully lobbied for the inclusion of women's ICT needs in the formulation of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action.
- ▶ APCWNSP has played a crucial facilitating role in the creation of several active regional and national women's networking<sup>2</sup> support initiatives such as APC-Africa-Women, FamAfrique, Asian Women's Resource Exchange, WomensNet (South Africa), and Ukraine Mama86 Network.
- ▶ The Programme as a whole, and through its members has contributed to the development of gender-sensitive training materials in Website development and online women's solidarity as well as guidelines for gender-sensitive outreach and training methodologies.
- ▶ In 1987, the Programme implemented "Global Networking for Change,"<sup>3</sup>: the first formal research and evaluation project to document women's experiences in using ICT for activist-oriented networking. This research surveyed some 700 individual women and women's groups around the world.



- ▶ The Programme implemented “Women Working in ICTs,”<sup>4</sup> a research which focused specifically on women as ‘workers’ in ICTs. This research explores in more depth the experiences of individual women who participated in the design, development and implementation of the APCWNSP’s communication initiatives for the 1995 Beijing Conference.
- ▶ The Programme continues to actively advocate for policies and projects that address real needs and provide concrete solutions for developing information technology policy at the local, regional and global levels.
- ▶ The Programme is developing planning and advocacy tools to encourage appropriate and sustainable models for implementing women’s ICT programmes at the global, regional and national levels.
- ▶ Building on the initial evaluation results and analytical framework of the research done in 1997, APCWNSP is building a practical and thorough gender audit methodology for ICT project planners in donor agencies, ICT policymaking bodies and women’s organisations.

## WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME?

Within the APCWNSP, we recognise six organisational structures:

**The ‘Council’ of Participants** This is online forum where all APCWNSP members can participate

**The Coordinating Team** This is a small working group comprised of the Programme coordinator, the project(s) manager and a fundraiser/project developer

**Programmes** Members who are active in national and regional Internet-based women’s networks comprise this group. They work both autonomously from and collectively with international initiatives such as WomensNet South Africa and APC-Africa-Women.

**Projects** From time to time, working groups are convened to oversee the implementation of specific projects. In the past, project groups had been convened for the Beijing World Conference on Women<sup>5</sup> and the Gender and IT project<sup>6</sup>. Currently there is a project group for the Lessons Learned Project<sup>7</sup>. Far more projects have been implemented at national and regional



levels and many of these are described in Toolkit 3: *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally*.

**Work areas** Members participate in these areas when they have a particular interest in a specific issue or piece of work. For example, there are currently smaller working groups for developing policy position papers on topics such as communication rights and Internet governance<sup>8</sup>.

**Committees** The Programme currently has a hiring committee, an evaluation committee and a fundraising committee.

Each of these structures has their own online working spaces. In some cases they even have their own Websites as well as their own convenor or coordinator. In general, the positions of convenor or coordinator are voluntary, unless there is funding from a project work to cover them.

## HOW DOES THE PROGRAMME OPERATE?

We think of the APCWNSP as a networked organisation.

We function as a network of women and their organisations who are actively involved in activities which promote, support, or facilitate women's access to, and use of ICT. The organisational structure of the APCWNSP reflects the motivations and interests of all participants and is therefore inclusive, accessible, and pragmatic. The Programme operates on a combination of minimal administration and coordination and maximum output in activities, through an open, secure, and respectful online environment where all participants can work and meet.

The APCWNSP as a networked organisation can be characterised with the following keywords:

- ▶ multi-cultural (diversity in cultures, languages, race, class, education);
- ▶ multi-interest (diversity in needs, expectations, representations, interests);
- ▶ supportive (affective, sharing, attention);
- ▶ consultative and participatory (in planning, decision-making);
- ▶ egalitarian and inclusive (in participation, decision-making);



- ▶ flexible and evolving (in participation);
- ▶ multi-level and multi-directional (inward and forward looking, action-oriented).

The Programme works primarily in an online world. Using a combination of email, mailing lists and newsgroups; we are able to coordinate, develop action plans, implement activities, support and mentor one another while maintaining and strengthening our organisational and personal relationships. Of course, we also meet face-to-face whenever opportunities present themselves (such as national, regional or international workshops and conference) or through explicitly funded workshops and meetings of the Programme.

## **WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE PROGRAMME?**

Our Programme members are women from more than 20 countries from North, South, East and West. They are individual women and women's groups and organisations working in the field of gender and ICT and actively supporting women's networking.

Our Programme members are specialists in areas such as training, information facilitation, technical work and policy issues. Many of us work on a voluntary basis. We are mostly experienced network users rather than formally-trained ICT experts. We come from different backgrounds: among us are activists on issues such as housing, environmental protection and women's health; librarians, journalists, web developers, technicians, and user support providers. Some of us work for Internet Service/Content Providers (ISP/ICP) that are members of the Association For Progressive Communications<sup>9</sup>. Some are independent activists, and some are members of women's organisations.

## **HOW DO YOU BECOME A MEMBER?**

The membership process is quite simple.

The criteria below relate to membership of the international network of the APCWNSP, but the criteria for becoming a member of a regional network of APCWNSP (for example, APC-Africa-Women) are fairly similar.

## The APCWNSP's First 8 Years



- ▶ being aware of and sympathetic towards the APCWNSP's charter, mission, goals and objectives
- ▶ actively participating in regional or global spaces, projects or work areas
- ▶ acknowledging the name and membership of APCWNSP in external representations
- ▶ if representing an organisation, having organisational or institutional support from the organisation

New members are normally introduced and nominated by an existing member. If the membership nominee is representing an organisation, it is expected that she will have the support and endorsement of her organisation to represent them to the programme.

All members, whether they be individuals or representing national or regional networks and organisations, are welcome to join the 'council of members' which is the international online space. If appropriate, they may also join any or all of the workspaces. All members are entitled to have an email address in the format xxxx@apcwomen.org which can be forwarded to an existing mailbox.

The Membership requirements are fairly simple:

- ▶ be aware of and sympathetic towards the APCWNSP's charter, mission, goals and objectives
- ▶ actively participate in regional or global spaces, projects or work areas
- ▶ acknowledge the name and membership of APCWNSP in external representations
- ▶ bring organisational support if representing an organisation

## WORK ETHICS, PRACTICE AND 'WAYS-OF-DOING'

Our mission and goals define our activity priorities. Our internal structures, communication spaces and processes provide a framework for how we get things done. We have a principle of providing whenever possible, fair recompense to women who work. But to do this, we rely heavily on fundraising



and so the Programme members inevitably work voluntarily. But the way we work is probably one of the most interesting aspects of the Programme, as it is this way which has contributed most significantly to our longevity and strength.

If we were to try to articulate these 'ways-of-doing', we would probably do so by identifying principles within a broad guiding framework:

- ▶ The APCWNSP strives to create and maintain work principles and work relations which honour and respect the dignity, equality, and security of each individual and organisation involved in the APCWNSP.
- ▶ The APCWNSP strives to inform and involve each APCWNSP participant on an equal basis.
- ▶ The APCWNSP strives to share its collective knowledge and experiences with other women and networks.
- ▶ The APCWNSP strives to take a pro-active stand in cases of harassment against one of its participants or relations, based on gender, social or ethnic background.
- ▶ The APCWNSP strives to have structures and positions which represent a diversity of cultural, social, and regional backgrounds.
- ▶ The APCWNSP strongly believes in a consultative and participatory approach to discussion and decision-making by being open, inclusive, and respectful. ○

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The articles in this booklet and the accompanying booklets demonstrate some of the work the Programme has engaged with in these areas.
- 2 Please see Toolkit 3: *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally* for detailed case studies of some of these networks
- 3 Please see <http://community.web.net/apcwomen>
- 4 Please see Toolkit 1: Putting Beijing Online
- 5 please see <http://www.apcwomen.org/projects/beijing.html>
- 6 please see <http://www.apcwomen.org/projects/g&it.html>
- 7 please see <http://www.apcwomen.org/projects/ll.html>
- 8 please see <http://www.apcwomen.org/resources/index.html>
- 9 The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is a global network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including the Internet.

## *About the Contributors*

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Liz Probert is the Technical Director of GreenNet. She was part of the team which provided user and training support to the WomenAction-Europe and the WomenAction contingent in New York during the UN CSW meeting in March 2000 and the UNGASS in June 2000.



# Networking for Change

## The APCWNSP's First 8 Years

WE ARE WOMEN from more than 20 countries from North, South, East and West. Technicians, media communicators, information providers, project managers, web developers, financial workers, coordinators and executive directors — we have decided to work together online to build a strong Internet-based network that will support other women's networking initiatives. We are the APC Women's Networking Support Programme.

Eight years after we made our first step together, we offer these articles which chronicle the history of the APCWNSP and examine how we grew from a small band of women to a global network that served as an incubator of networking initiatives world-wide. We also examine emerging issues and challenges in gender and ICT policy advocacy and in the integration of new and old technologies to strengthen women's networking. Finally, we share the story of the WomenAction whose gestation and emergence into an effective global information and communications network we are very proud to have played a key part in.

