



*A Look at ASAFE*  
Electronic Commerce  
for African Women Entrepreneurs

*Dorothy Okello*

In 1998, Gisele Yitamben, executive director of the Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui a la Femme Entrepreneur (ASAFE), attended an Internet training workshop for women organised by ABANTU for Development, an NGO in Kenya that promotes gender and an African perspective in human resource development.

On her return to Cameroon, she led ASAFE to initiate discussions with its members to conduct a similar regional exercise for women entrepreneurs - this time introducing the use of electronic commerce in textiles, agro-industries and art.

To ASAFE, a number of developments in the international export scene had emerged giving a new dimension to business opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Among such developments are the liberalisation of global trade and macro-economic reforms at the national level, the growth of urbanisation that is linked to the development of information and communication technology (ICT), and the increasing importance of environmental considerations and affirmation of cultural identities. The breakdown of trade barriers facilitated access to the global market, bringing foreign competition "home" by eliminating privileges and protection of the local market. At the same time, new prospects and opportunities for dynamic, creative and innovative small and medium enterprises were opened up. Technological advances in ICT have shortened distances between countries. International trade has ceased to be the preserve of large export companies and small business enterprises stood to benefit greatly from this development. Women entrepreneurs who are largely involved in textile and food processing industries can now enter the global market easier than before. In this broad socio-economic context, ASAFE took the challenge to engage in electronic commerce.



Together with Networked Intelligence for Development (NID), ASAFE planned a week-long training session and trade exhibit in Douala, Cameroon in November 1999. Dubbed the “First Cyber Forum of Women Entrepreneurs of Africa and the Diaspora,” the event hoped to familiarise African women with e-commerce and what it takes to engage in it. The different sessions tackled marketing, business plan development, the Internet, Web page design, digital camera-work and general computerisation issues. The trade exhibition featured the participants’ products, including textiles, art and agro-processed products.

The week-long training and exhibition became an opportunity for African women entrepreneurs to meet and discuss potential business alliances. They also learned that the main obstacle to small and micro-enterprise trade was less about access to the Internet and was more about the processes of and the barriers to cross-border trade, within and outside of Africa.

The women entrepreneurs appreciated the value of electronic communication and e-commerce which gave them various business options and promoted alliances along their level and type of enterprises both nationally and regionally. More importantly, some of the women realised that these alliances could be forged through ICT and could turn regional disparities within Africa into business and trading opportunities. In addition, their products were exhibited at the fair and were deemed competitive by market experts from the United States and Europe. Some were even selected for marketing in North America.

## **ASAFE’S PROGRAMME GOALS**

ASAFE was established in 1989 to provide information and banking support services to its members. It focused its attention to the needs of women entrepreneurs through awareness-raising and provision of education, training and micro-credit services.

ASAFE members are small entrepreneurs, majority of who are engaged in food processing, services, textiles, art and trade. They come from a number of African countries including Cameroon, Chad, Benin, Gabon, Congo, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso and meet every month at the ASAFE headquarters in Douala, Cameroon. Most of them travel in order to sell their goods or pur-



chase equipment in distant places like Asia, or within Africa such as Chad, Cameroon, Gabon, Nigeria, Benin and the Central African Republic. A few have participated in trade fair exhibitions in Europe and North America.

ASAFE derives its income from its members through contributions, from grants and donations and service fees for goods marketed at the ASAFE stall in Dakar-Douala, Cameroon.

ASAFE has established key relationships and partnerships along three levels: national, regional level, and global. At the national level, ASAFE works with grassroots associations and NGOs in the rural areas to pass along information on entrepreneurship development and business opportunities. These associations and NGOs disseminate the information provided by ASAFE into local languages for the benefit of their members. In partnership with the Association of Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO), ASAFE publishes DEBBO, a quarterly newsletter for women entrepreneurs that comes out in French and English.

In addition, ASAFE with the assistance from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is setting up computer facilities that will enable micro enterprises in the rural areas to participate in international trade.

At the regional level, ASAFE is supported by ITU in setting up a resource centre in Douala, Cameroon to promote e-commerce and to provide training and Internet access. Through this infrastructure support, African women entrepreneurs will be able to develop virtual shops for their products that would broaden their market reach. This initiative is also made possible with the participation of NID in providing training and counseling and in sourcing of funds.

At the global level, ASAFE works with several associations and institutions of the African diaspora in Canada, Switzerland and the United States. Through these partnerships, products of ASAFE members are made available in big ceremonies and events in the partners' countries. These partners also inform their colleagues and other interested parties about ASAFE's activities, help identify prospective markets for ASAFE and provide information on improving the quality of products from Africa. Because of these partnerships, ASAFE members' products were exhibited in Geneva, Switzerland during an African Art Exhibition held in January 2000. Members were also invited to participate in fashion shows in Toronto, Canada and in Los Angeles, United States on November 2000. Designs of stools and horns were sent digitally to



potential retailers in Toronto. Through these, the talents and creativity of ASAFE members become visible in the international market.

Within the framework of globalisation, ASAFE/NID have sensitised private companies in India and Canada to the idea of giving priority to technologies that take into account the present level of income of the majority of African micro and small enterprises. In line with this, ASAFE has organised a rural technology fair exhibit to be held in Cameroon in November 2000.

ASAFE and NID have also established links with two websites that market products on the web: World2Market.com (<http://www.world2market.com>) and PEOPLink (<http://www.peoplinc.org>).

## **TURNING LIMITATIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES**

Early successes notwithstanding, ASAFE has had its share of difficult obstacles. The implementation of its e-commerce program, for example, was delayed due to the poor state of telecommunications in Cameroon and the inadequacy in ICT skills of many local technicians. It was quite a hurdle, but ASAFE was able to install computers and software required for e-trading, identify which key industries will be targeted for e-commerce, develop an e-market study for its members' products, identify potential suppliers of equipments and raw materials as well as financial partners.

More developments along the lines of e-commerce are in the way as ASAFE builds a resource centre which will house a training facility as well as a "cyber-boutique" with six to seven computers for public access. The resource center is envisioned to serve as an "incubator" area for agro-processing enterprises, a space where women can have planning and brainstorming sessions.

ASAFE is also working to promote the transfer of appropriate technology from other countries. It is exploring, for example, technologies developed in India in agro-processing and software packages for medium and small enterprises

Currently under construction is a Website (<http://www.asafe.org>) which is designed to widen ASAFE's alliances with businesses which provide appropriate marketing and other information over the Web. It is working with ITU



towards providing wider and better connectivity infrastructure and ICT services to its members.

ASAFE believes that e-commerce will provide numerous opportunities to its members like easier retrieval of relevant information to access to potential markets, business partners and investors. Access to information about commercial and trade events, sources of raw materials and equipment, and prevailing sanitary norms and techniques as well as phytosanitary and environmental regulations in a targetted country, can spell the difference between success and failure in business. Also direct access to funding partners and the mass market can increase the income small entrepreneurs since they don't have to work through mediators and "middle-men." E-commerce also has the added benefit of connecting small entrepreneurs to training and business development course, increasing the visibility of the enterprises owned and/or managed by women and cutting the cost for business travels and transactions. Finally, ASAFE is also anticipating a time when ASAFE members from different regions can, using the Internet, jointly bid for contracts, to which individually they would not be able to qualify.

ASAFE currently has 3,000 members. Though only a small number of them are already exporting their products to Europe through the use of ICT, ASAFE's current business plan to establish e-commerce for as many of its local members as possible will benefit more women entrepreneurs in the immediate future. ○

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the input and support of Gisele Yitamben (ASAFE) and Nidhi Tandon (NID). Information about NID is available at: <http://www.networkedintelligence.com>

*famafrique*  
More than a Website  
for Francophone African Women

*Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla*

Famafrique is a women's electronic network in Francophone Africa actively working to increase and to strengthen the presence and visibility on the Internet of the women's movement in French-speaking Africa. Founded in 1998, Famafrique grew from the seeds planted in the early 1990s by women and their organisations that decided to harness the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to advance the status of women in Francophone Africa.

The UN World Conference on Women (UNWCW) in 1995 provided the opportunity for women to train the spotlight on their issues and concerns. Many women's organisations in Francophone Africa wanted to take part in this historic process. However, relevant information about the conference and women's activities in relation to it was hard to come by, and when it did, was always late in coming. Moreover, since most of the information was written in English, women's organisations in French-speaking countries were at a great disadvantage. The views, opinions and activities of women's groups in Francophone Africa were generally invisible in the mainstream media.

To address this problem, the Environment and Development in the Third World-Synergy Gender and Development (ENDA-SYNFEV) began to use electronic communication tools. Our base organisation, Environment and Development in the Third World (ENDA) and networks like the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APCWNSP), provided invaluable organisational and technical support for this undertaking. (ENDA is a member of APC, and ENDA-SYNFEV is a member of the APCWNSP and APC-Africa-Women.)

Initially, we used only e-mail and the old Fido Network ran by ENDA and other APC members since Francophone Africa was connected to the Internet only in 1997. Using e-mail was a very new thing in our region so we organised



trainings to introduce women to electronic networking and to teach them how to use e-mail. Using APC's electronic conference system, we established a public electronic information service where we distributed information about women in Africa in French. We also set up a private electronic conference space for Francophone women's groups.

In 1998, ENDA-SYNFEV decided to use the World Wide Web to enhance women's networking in French-speaking Africa. Having learned a lot from our English-speaking counterparts, we were ready to take women's networking in Francophone Africa to the proverbial next level. A project proposal we developed called "Women Superhighways in Francophone Africa" received funding support from the Fonds Francophone des Inforoutes (Francophone Superhighways Fund) which was created by the Agence de la Francophonie.

The main objective of the project was to develop, through a Website, an active presence and high visibility on the Internet of Francophone African women's groups active around the issues of sustainable development, gender equality and peace. Famafrigue was that Website.

## CONSTRUCTING THE FAMAFRIGUE SITE

The construction of the Famafrigue Website began in April 1999. The first phase of the work involved designing the site map, identifying the site labels, creating a logo, and finally registering the domain name. After this came the uploading of documents.

In the meantime, a fortnightly electronic bulletin called *La toile d'elles* (women's weaving) was started to support the Website. A lot of time was spent scanning the World Wide Web for information in French which were relevant to women in Africa. Information were reprinted or repackaged for *La toile d'elles* and linked to the Famafrigue Site. Women from different countries sent Famafrigue numerous messages of support and congratulated the launch of the bulletin.

More documents were uploaded to the Site from May to July. The African Women's Day on July 31 was an auspicious day for us. The Famafrigue Website was finally unveiled to the public. The launching was marked by a public forum in Senegal attended by the media, women's organisations and youth groups. A press release was sent to numerous mailing lists to inform people



outside Senegal about the Site launch. The Site logged some 4,500 visits during the week of the launch.

In November 1999, Famafrigue joined other African women's organisations and networks in the Sixth Regional African Conference on Women which was part of the global process to review the Beijing Platform for Action. Posters and postcards about the Famafrigue Site were distributed to the women who attended the regional conference.

Adjustments in the bulletin, *La toile d'elles* were implemented to make its visual design consistent with the Famafrigue Site and to highlight the new information and resources in the Site. Soon after, a significant increase of Site users was registered. An internal search engine for the site was installed to make it easier for users to find information they needed. The need to scan resources for the Site has decreased since many visitors and organisations now contribute news and information to Famafrigue. The Site allows visitors to contribute news and information interactively.

Famafrigue's main audience are women's organisations and NGOs in Francophone Africa who are working to promote women's issues. But women from other parts of the world have also written asking for information. Men, too, have also written to us about the Site.

The Famafrigue Site is administered by three full-time project staff and some interns. In several occasions, it has hired the services of professional consultants on media and women's issues to assist in its activities. Women's organisations that participate in the Famafrigue network discuss issues and problems and coordinate activities through a private electronic list called *femme-afrique*. In truth, it is hardly possible to speak about a project team without mentioning the virtual networks of women in Africa and other regions who have provided information, peer support and guidance.

As of March 2000, the Website contained some 450 documents accessed at an average of 6,500 times a week. Eighty percent of the messages sent through the Site's interactive message board came from women. And of the 400 subscribers of *La toile d'elles*, 40 percent were from Africa.



## MORE THAN A WEBSITE

We believe that building a Website is not an end in itself. We saw the Famafrigue as a way to promote wider linkages and tighter cooperation among women's organisations in Francophone Africa. This approach to ICT development was the rationale for the project's four major components, namely: developing and distributing information, creating electronic communication spaces, providing training and technical support to participants, and promoting actions on the issue of "Internet for women." Famafrigue is therefore, a Website and a network of Francophone African women.

Famafrigue is run by ENDA-SYNFEV in partnership with Inter Press Service and Les Pénélopes. The former is an international press agency, focusing on the South to provide news and features in French about women in Africa. Les Pénélopes, a feminist organisation in France is known for its innovative use of new media in disseminating information in French for women around the globe. Informal but active partnerships have also been developed with other electronic press agencies like SYFIA and PANA, and with Francophone women's organisations like Netfemmes and the Association Internationale des Femmes Francophones.

The Famafrigue network is linked to a vast virtual network of women spanning Africa and the world. We have actively collaborated with networks like the APCWNSP, APC-Africa-Women, WomensNet in South Africa, Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), and WomenAction. English is the main language used in these networks, but the activities of these networks have provided an opportunity for Francophone women around the globe to meet and develop ideas about future electronic initiatives for Francophone women.

Famafrigue's founding members were the 15 women's groups from 15 Francophone African countries that participated in the training workshop on "Electronic communication for Francophone African women" which was organised in 1996 by ENDA-SYNFEV. African women in the Diaspora are also part of Famafrigue. The initial successes of Famafrigue have attracted more participants and its core group now has 54 members representing organisations in countries where Internet connectivity is relatively easier like Senegal, Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo. Women's organisations in Mauritania and the Ivory Coast have also expressed keen interest. However Famafrigue's outreach remain weak in Central Africa (Chad, Niger, and Cen-



tral African Republic), Northern Africa (Maghreb countries), the Great Lakes region (Congo, RDC, Burundi, and Rwanda), and the Indian Ocean zone (Madagascar, Mauritius).

## FAMAFRIQUE – THE CONTINUING STORY

Training and technical support is provided to Famafrigue by ENDA, which is an Internet Service Provider for the NGO community in Senegal. Most of the members of the Famafrigue network, however, do not enjoy the same support base.

The number of women's organisations that are being networked electronically continue to increase, but most of them are still only using e-mail. Even with dial-up access to the Internet, many are still uncomfortable or lack training in maximising the use of the World Wide Web. But so far, none of the women's groups who have participated in Famafrigue's trainings have bluntly refused to learn and to use ICTs. In fact, participants after having made their first web page or sent their first e-mail have always looked forward to learning more about ICTs. Notably, one of the most popular sections in the Famafrigue Site is "Driving School" which contains short tutorials on how to take care of your computer, how to install anti-virus software, how to defragment the hard drive, and other practical how-tos.

Some obstacles, however, are more difficult to hurdle. Most women's organisations have very limited funds for them to afford a computer. If they manage to buy one, however, they have little or no knowledge and skill to maintain it or integrate its use in their plans and activities.

Has Famafrigue reached its goal of increasing the presence and visibility in the Internet of Francophone African women and their issues and concerns?

Yes, though partially. But under tremendous odds, the first virtual network and Web gateway by, for and of Francophone African women were set up. Nothing is impossible when women work together, especially with a lift from friends. ○



## RESOURCES

**ENDA Third World** <http://www.enda.sn>

**ENDA-SYNFEV** <http://www.enda.sn/synfev/synfev.htm>

**Famafrique** <http://www.famafrique.org>

**Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie** <http://agence.francophonie.org>

**Les Pénélopes** <http://www.penelopes.org>

**Inter Press Service** <http://www.link.no/ips/fra>

### Two months of interactivity on the Famafrique web site

(Excerpts, June-July 2000, names and addresses withheld)

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From: c...@...be ; Date: Thu, 1 Jun 2000

Je tiens tout d'abord à vous féliciter pour votre site que je trouve très bien fait. Pour l'oral de mes études, je pensais surtout parler de l'actualité de cette année. Pensez-vous qu'il y a eu un événement qu'il est impensable de ne pas citer? Merci beaucoup

—  
Date: Sun, 04 Jun 2000 ; From: "O. M." <O...@...fr>

Je suis en train d'écrire un livre sur les châtements corporels infligés aux enfants .... Mais je n'ai rien sur le Sénégal. Si vous pouvez m'aider, merci beaucoup.

—  
From: "R.p.L" <u...@...ne> ; Date: Mon, 5 Jun 2000

Je m'appelle Z..., je reçois vos publications par le biais d'une amie , félicitations, je les apprécie beaucoup. Je m'intéresse à l'annonce de formation en leader de développement que vous avez postée pour L.... comment faire pour déposer ma candidature. Je vous remercie d'avance de faire suite à mon message.

—  
Date: Tue, 06 Jun 2000 ; From: F.A. <f...@...net>

je recherche le contact d'une ong en Afrique occidentale dans le cadre de la lutte contre le travail des enfants.

—  
From: "s.m." <s...@...com> ; Date: Wed, 07 Jun 2000  
I am a Kenyan Graduate student in Public Health, writing a Masters Thesis paper on Female genital Mutilations. I kindly request for information regarding the projects that have been initiated so far in eradication of Female Genital Mutilation in Senegal.

—  
Date: Thu, 15 Jun 2000 ; From: "H.M." <M...@...ORG>

Greetings from Ethiopia. Please send me any news in the field of gender issues through e-mail or my postal address.

—  
Date: Fri, 16 Jun 2000 ; From: F.D.<f...@...fr>

J'ai des tâches noires dûes aux boutons au moment des règles.

Quel soin utiliser pour les enlever? Merci de me répondre

—  
From: "T..." <t...@...fr> ; Date: Sun, 18 Jun 2000

Bonjour, Je vous propose de visiter un site sur la culture amazigh dont je m'occupe qui peut peut-être vous intéressera (adresse ci-dessous)? à bientôt

—  
From: a.f.s. <a...@...com> ; Date: Thu, 22 Jun 2000

Sur le terrain je coordonne et renforce les capacités de plusieurs cooperatives rurales. .... je suis intéressée par l'acquisition et la diffusion de l'information sur les



femmes et le développement.

De : F.I. <f...@....com> ; Envoyé : 25 juin, 2000

Bonjour, Savez-vous où nous pouvons nous procurer le CD ROM sur la situation des femmes en Afrique? Nous sommes à Bamako, Mali. Merci!

From: "L.A." <m...@....fr> ; Date: Thu, 29 Jun 2000 19:21:00 +0200

Bonjour, j'aimerais vous parler d'une association togolaise avec laquelle j'ai réalisé un chantier durant l'été 1999. Cette assoc. est composée par un groupe de femmes extraordinaires qui se battent pour faire évoluer la situation de la femme au Togo. Ce qui serait intéressant, ce serait que vous arriviez à les contacter pour qu'elles parle de leurs expériences..

Date: Mon, 03 Jul 2000 ; From: m.b. <m...@....fr>  
bonjour famafrique! je voudrais savoir si quelqu'une d'entre vous se trouve à Paris le 7 juillet ??? pour participer à un débat sur la globalisation et les nouvelles technologies en Afrique. veuillez me contacter avec urgence. merci et bien à vous,

From: "M.P." <M...@....fr> ; Date: Sun, 9 Jul 2000  
je prépare un travail de thèse sur la santé de la mère et de l'enfant dans la médecine traditionnelle aux Comores. Je me permets de vous solliciter afin d'obtenir des informations supplémentaires.

From: J.M. <J.@....uk> ; Date: Tue, 11 Jul 2000  
Bonjour! merci pour toutes les informations. J'ai besoin d'urgence de quelques données sur l'impact de la dette sur les femmes et les enfants en Afrique. J'en ai besoin pour une conférence aux USA ou je me rends déjà ce vendredi.

Date: Tue, 11 Jul 2000 ; From "C.C." <d.@un...org>  
Nous sommes une union pour la promotion des femmes

au Niger. Nous souhaitons connaître vos activités pour nouer des relations de partenariat

From: "F.-N." <...@...ne> ; Date: Thu, 20 Jul 2000  
C'est tout juste pour savoir si vous avez une représentation au Niger auprès de laquelle on peut avoir certaines informations. Meilleures salutations

Sender: m...@....com ; Date: Fri, 28 Jul 2000  
Bonjour, J'aime beaucoup votre site dont je parle à mes stagiaires. Puis-je mettre un lien de mon site vers le votre ? Aussi j'anime une liste de diffusion s'adressant au secrétaire et secrétaire francophone : Merci de diffuser l'info ! J'aime vraiment beaucoup votre site !!!

From: C.D. <D...@....fr> ; Date: Fri, 28 Jul 2000  
Je souhaiterais prendre contact avec des groupes de femmes ayant des connaissances sur le commerce au Bénin.

From: "c." <c...@....org> ; Date: Sun, 30 Jul 2000  
Notre ONG vient de produire une cassette de lutte contre l'excision dénommée "STOP EXCISION" avec la participation des plus grandes voix du Mali, nous contacter au...

Date: Thu, 03 Aug 2000 ; From: "c.m." <c @un...org>  
Nous vous saurions gré de nous faire parvenir, la liste des femmes africaines magistrats (juge, avocat, procureur) ou occupant des postes de ministres de la justice.

From: "N." <n...@....com> ; Date: Wed, 2 Aug 2000  
J'adore votre action.

From: "PH." <p...@....fr> ; Date: Fri, 4 Aug 2000  
Je recherche des contacts au Bénin et au Burkina Faso avec des femmes oeuvrant dans le domaine des Droits de la femme, sur les questions d'insertion dans des ini-

## Acting Locally, Connecting Globally



tiatives sociales, économiques et culturelles. Je recherche aussi à contacter des femmes, qui écrivent des romans, des nouvelles ou tout autre forme de texte. Merci de vos conseils et de votre réponse

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Date: Fri, 04 Aug 2000 ; From: "C.N." <s...@....fr>  
Pourrions-nous envisager des échanges avec votre site que nous apprécions ? ▶

# *Women'sNet in South Africa* Lighting the Path for Women's Electronic Networking in Africa and Beyond

*the Women'sNet team*

The 1994 elections in South Africa had stripped many women's organisations of a key layer of leadership. Particularly affected was the Women's National Coalition, a strong source of direction for the movement. Relations between the State and civil society have always been problematic in South Africa, even after the end of apartheid. In fact, with leaders of the mass movements and civil society organisations being recruited into government positions, the relations between State and civil society have become quite complex.

Women in civil society were expressing their sense of isolation from and frustration with the women who they felt should be representing their interests in elected office. On the other hand, women in government — elected or appointed — were also beginning to feel isolated from their former colleagues in the street parliament and from the information they need to do their work effectively.

The number of women in elected office, particularly at national Parliament, as well as the government and constitutional commitment to gender equality, however, represented a great opportunity for gender activism. And this supportive political environment corresponded with the emerging use of information and communication technology (ICT) in South Africa. An electronic information and communication network, therefore, that would connect women in civil society and women in elected office with key gender information would be a powerful tool.

Women'sNet was initiated to meet this challenge: to develop an electronic information resource that would provide critical South African gender information as well as to empower women's organisations with the skills needed to effectively utilise new technology.



The initial push to get the WomensNet off the ground came from the collaboration between the Commonwealth Secretariat and Southern African NGO Network (SANGONeT). The Commonwealth was looking to support the development of an electronic network that would connect women in national Parliament with women in provincial Parliament to facilitate the exchange of information about legislative gender issues. SANGONeT at the same time was thinking more broadly about developing programs and services which have a strong focus on women's issues.

The actual Women'sNet project emerged through a process of consultations and meetings involving women's organisations in South Africa and women leaders in the area of gender activism and ICT from other countries in Africa.

The Commonwealth Secretariat funded the development of an initial proposal jointly developed by two gender specialists from the Commonwealth Secretariat Special Technical Assistance Mission for South Africa and by the Executive Director of SANGONeT. This project proposal was circulated for review and feedback to members of the South African women's movement as well as to members of the APC Women's Network Support Programme and other women working in the area of gender and ICTs.

This initial development process was followed by a two-day national consultation in June 1997 which was attended by representatives from civil society organisations, government agencies and parliament. The purpose of the consultation was to introduce members of the South African women's movement to the idea of creating a women's electronic information resource and network (i.e. Women'sNet ). The participants were excited about Women'sNet and actively contributed to the drafting of the Women'sNet mission statement, defining its goals and planning its information work strategy. The agreements from this consultation became the basis for the consolidated project proposal, as well as the set of requirements for representation in the project's Advisory Group and Information Strategy Team — the two structures identified as necessary to support the project.



## BUILDING THE WOMEN'SNET WEBSITE

The next phase of the project development involved the construction of the Women'sNet Website. The Information Strategy Team held a four-day training and planning workshop in December 1997. Members of the Information Strategy Team — which included not only South African information workers but women working with information in other African countries — worked with the SANGONeT staff to plan and construct the Website. Women from other countries were invited to join the team so that Women'sNet can gain from their skills and knowledge. At the same time, it was also an opportunity for women from other parts of Africa to participate in a process which they might wish to replicate in their own countries. To prepare for the training and planning workshop, members of the team conducted consultations through a mailing list which afterwards also became the space for coordinating and collaborating on the implementation of the Website development plan.

From funds received from the Mott Foundation, Women'sNet was able to hire and pay two full time staff — a Project Co-ordinator and an Information Co-ordinator. In early 1998, Women'sNet received funds from the British Department for International Development to develop a special resource on violence against women for a conference in Durban that was scheduled in March. This resource became the centerpiece of the Women'sNet Site when it was finally launched on International Women's Day during separate but synchronised events in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.

Women'sNet does not have a formal promotion strategy, but this has not prevented the Website from becoming very popular. Much of Women'sNet's promotion work within the women's community is done through networking and participating in conferences in South Africa and internationally. It has also worked quite successfully to get media coverage when launching projects or new resources.

A colourful Women'sNet poster and post card were developed when the project was launched in 1998 and these materials are distributed at events and conferences to remind participants of Women'sNet's Internet address.

To drive traffic to its Website, Women'sNet issues a weekly e-mail bulletin called womensnet-news which provides subscribers information about new



resources in the Site as well as information about upcoming events and activities of the network.

## **WOMEN WHO MOVED WOMEN'SNET**

The demographic profile of Women'sNet initiators is substantially similar: white, university-educated, middle class women, from 27 to 40 years of age. The women involved in the founding of Women'sNet were Colleen Lowe Morna, at that time the Gender Advisor to the Commonwealth Special Technical Assistance Mission in South Africa; Rebecca Holmes, then a volunteer-advisor with the Commonwealth and working as a Gender Advisor with the Parliamentary Women's Group in national Parliament in Cape Town; Anriette Esterhuysen, then Executive Director of SANGONeT and currently APC Executive Director; Maureen James, APC staff member and a resident in South Africa in 1997-1998; Jennifer Radloff, coordinator of the Women'sNet Information Strategy Team and co-organiser of the Women'sNet Website development workshop.

Women'sNet participants, including members of the Information Strategy Team and Advisory Group were more broadly representative of South African society: black, Indian, coloured and white; but also primarily middle class and educated, and with ages ranging from 30 to 50.

Although two of the key initiators of the project are lesbians, sexual orientation politics and issues were not a focus point in Women'sNet project development in part because sexual orientation was not yet a central (or even much of a peripheral issue) in the South African women's movement when Women'sNet began.

## **LINKING WITH OTHER WOMEN'S NETWORKS**

Women'sNet is a core member of the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme in Africa (APC-Africa-Women). This relationship is consolidated by the representation of other members of APC-Africa-Women in the Women'sNet's Information Strategy Team. Women'sNet also participates in other international networks where APC has an active presence such as the global APC Women's Networking



Support Programme and the WomenAction network for the Beijing plus 5 review process.

In Africa, Women'sNet is a core member of Flame/Flamme (African Sisters Organising On Line), a bilingual (French and English) electronic networking initiative to help African women's NGOs participate more effectively in the Beijing +5 process. It also works closely with the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), an electronic networking initiative among women's resource and information centres.

## **RELATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITIES WITH THE COMMUNITY**

Project accountability for Women'sNet rests on SANGONeT and the South African Commission on Gender Equality (CGE). The project manager of Women'sNet, the Chief Executive Officer of the CGE and the Executive Director of SANGONeT make up the Executive Management Committee which is responsible for implementing Women'sNet's mandate and meeting its accountabilities to its constituencies and funders.

Women'sNet's relationship with CGE and SANGONeT is core to its work. With CGE, a national structure set up by constitutional mandate, Women'sNet has accessed an extensive number of women's organisations working with the CGE through its national and provincial offices.

Women'sNet's relationship with SANGONeT, on the other hand focuses on the practical and political aspects of using ICTs for social and gender justice. On a practical level, SANGONeT provides e-mail, Web and mailing list hosting services to Women'sNet. SANGONeT's training department participates extensively in shaping and developing the ICT training which Women'sNet provides to women's organisations, and the SANGONeT web department provides higher level web design and development services. At a strategic level, SANGONeT participates in shaping Women'sNet's programme focus through its representation in the Women'sNet Advisory Group and the Executive Management Committee.

Women'sNet's accountability and responsiveness to the women's community is facilitated through the Advisory Group and Information Strategy Team. These two structures are composed of representatives from African



women's organisations and government agencies working on gender equality. The Advisory Group meets twice a year and is responsible for guiding the overall strategic direction of Women'sNet. The Information Strategy Team, on the other hand, guides Women'sNet's information networking efforts.

In addition, Women'sNet in all its projects always tries to build and strengthen formal and informal partnerships with women's organisations. The aim of these partnerships is to mutually support the growth of strong and relevant information and communications network around key gender issues.

This partnership, for example, is expressed in the current practice whereby women's organisations identify and provide key information for publication and distribution through the Women'sNet Websites and mailing lists, while Women'sNet provides them training ICT skills.

## **CORE PROGRAMMES AND STRATEGIC PLANS OF WOMEN'SNET**

Women'sNet has two core programme areas: developing gender specific information resources and communication networks; and training women's organisations to access and use these resources. Women'sNet also seeks ways to effectively participate in the gender and ICT policy arena.

Training is obviously a critical aspect of Women'sNet's work given the inequality of access to the Internet and the development environment in which Women'sNet is operating. Women'sNet is constantly forced to address and reassess how best to meet the challenges posed by access and development issues. Repackaging information in different formats — including print publications and audio for community radio — is being explored. However, this kind of repackaging work is labour and cost intensive. Women'sNet is pursuing a broader strategy to build information networks where women's organisations (that are more likely to have the resources and equipment/infrastructure required to connect to the Internet) can source information from Women'sNet and publish it in a form most useful to the communities of women they serve.

With each project, Women'sNet attempts to establish meaningful information partnerships with as many organisations as possible in order to ex-



pand its information networks, as well as to increase the number of people who can contribute to the development of the Women'sNet Website.

Much of Women'sNet's core work takes place through issue-based projects. This is not intentional, but is an outcome of the project-oriented rather than core support-oriented funding environment. Because of this, Women'sNet has essentially become an umbrella for many different information and training projects. These projects typically include both an information development and a training component.

Through its different projects, Women'sNet has been able to develop three significant resources in its Website: preventing violence against women, women and elections, and women and enterprise. Women'sNet has also developed three other separate Websites — a Women and Human Rights Website, a community radio Website with radio-ready text files and a Beijing +5 in Africa Website. Many of these web-based resources were developed using the same methodology employed in the creation of the original Women'sNet Website, which was a unique combination of information planning and ICT skills training.

It is important to underscore, however, the tremendous amount of work that went into running the different projects of Women'sNet. There are constant donor reports to prepare and submit, funding proposals to develop and project budgets to monitor.

Women'sNet's planning cycle since its inception has focused around the development of a core funding proposal that lays out broad programme goals in the two key result areas: information development, dissemination and publishing; and ICT skills training.

Only at the start of its third year did Women'sNet begin to put in place a monitoring and evaluation system through the adaptation of the evaluation methodology called Social and Ethical Accounting Auditing and Reporting or SEAAR. This evaluation method involves engaging key stakeholders of Women'sNet to come up with a series of social accounts that will feed into Women'sNet's planning.



## DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

Women'sNet has three full-time paid staff — the Project Manager, the Information Coordinator, and the Training Coordinator. Occasionally, consultants have been hired to assist with some special project activities. Women'sNet also works with volunteers and interns who work a minimum of six months with the network.

The Project Manager is responsible for the overall financial and programmatic well-being of Women'sNet. She is in charge of day to day operations as well as managing the staff. She participates in the monthly meeting of the Executive Management Committee to review strategic issues. In practice, however, the Executive Management Committee met only infrequently. As a result, the Project Manager worked more closely with the Executive Director of SANGONeT particularly in the areas of fundraising and donor reporting.

The Information Coordinator manages the development and maintenance of the Women'sNet Websites and works closely with the Information Strategy Team. This team works electronically via a mailing list and cues the Information Coordinator about important information and resource for publication on the Women'sNet Site.

The Training Coordinator develops and leads Women'sNet's training activities and the formation of a network of ICT trainers based in the provinces.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Apart from earnings from some minor consultancy work, Women'sNet subsists on funds provided by donor agencies. Core funding, which Women'sNet has found more difficult to raise than project funding, is provided by two American donors, the Mott Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

To date, Women'sNet has received project funding from the following international donor agencies: the Commonwealth Secretariat, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the British Department for International Development (DFID), Open Society Foundation, European Union Foundation for Human Rights, and the United Nations Development Programme. Its activities in relation to the review of the Beijing



Platform Action was supported by funds received by APC from the Rockefeller Foundation and Hivos.

As donor agencies start to deprioritise post-Apartheid South Africa, there is fear that international funding sources will dry up. In general, however, many donors are looking at the issue of using the Internet for development and the issue of gender and information technology is considered a priority area.



Women'sNet has achieved a great deal in three years. It has made a substantial contribution to South African women's media through its Websites and mailing lists. It has trained more than 300 women in using the Internet and e-mail. Women who have never been 'online' or have never used a computer have been able to develop bilingual web pages after attending a Women'sNet training workshop. Women'sNet has been featured by local and international media and cited by many for its innovative work.

New women's electronic networking initiatives have sprung in the African continent. Women'sNet can perhaps rightly claim that through its successes and failures, it is helping develop practices to inspire women's organisations to use ICT to advance women's empowerment. ○

# *Electronic Networking in Asia and the Pacific*

## The Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC)

*Cheekay Cinco and Chat Garcia Ramilo*

**re·source** (rsôrs, -srs, -zôrs, -zrs, r-sôrs, -srs, -zôrs, -zrs) n.

1. Something that can be used for support or help
2. Often resources. An available supply that can be drawn on when needed.

**ex·change** (iks-chnj) v.

1. To give and receive reciprocally

Resource exchange is a simple enough concept, if not general and generic. The idea behind the Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) stemmed from the challenge of information-sharing among women's resource centres in Asia through the use of new information and communication technology (ICT). AWORC was formed at a workshop organised by Isis International-Manila (henceforth Isis Manila) on 20–23 April 1998 as part of a series of activities that began in 1995 to build networks and strengthen capacities of women's resource and information agencies in the Asia-Pacific region.

### **MEETING OF INTENTS AND CAPACITIES**

From 1995 to 1998, a number of women's centres led by Isis Manila explored ways of sharing resources through joint publications, training and exchange visits. While these strategies resulted in concrete outputs such as publications, consultations and closer relationships, they also proved to be unsustainable and demanding in terms of financial and human resources. As a final effort to give life to a regional network of resource centres, the resource centre staff of Isis Manila who at the time were also expanding its work in



electronic networking decided to invite six women's centres from Asia to develop ways of sharing resources electronically.

For the Isis women involved in the workshop, "resource exchange" meant the sharing of bibliographic information among women's resource centres and special libraries in the region. The meeting was set primarily for the participants to strategise ways on how such an exchange could be made possible. Unfortunately, the technical solutions demonstrated were more appropriate for big, mainstream and well-resourced libraries rather than small, specialised and under-resourced women's centres. The workshop hit a dead end and it seemed that the idea of a shared multilingual bibliographic database was lost.

Just when the meeting was at an impasse, the Japanese women offered a solution that gave the workshop participants the needed confidence to push on. The Japanese women were from the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Centre and JCA-NET, a non-profit Internet service provider in Japan and the Japanese member node of APC.<sup>1</sup> At that time, JCA-NET had started developing a multi-lingual database and search mechanism, that once fully-developed, would allow users to upload, store and search information in various languages, including those with non-Latin scripts.

The women who came to the workshop in Manila had information they wanted to share but had no way of doing it. JCA-NET had a multi-lingual database and search mechanism that needed data.<sup>2</sup> It was an opportunity that could not be missed. The rest, as the often-used saying goes, is history or one could say the AWORC story.

The participating organisations of the workshop became the first members of the network: Asia Pacific Research and Resource Centre for Women (ARROW); Asia Japan Women's Resource Centre (AJWRC); Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI); University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development (UPCSWCD); Isis International-Manila; and the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS). JCA-NET and WNSP agreed to provide technical support to the network. After the first anniversary meeting of AWORC in June 1999, the network decided to give full membership to JCA-NET and WNSP.

In November 1998, at the Know How Conference in Amsterdam, members of Isis Manila met the executive director of the Asia Pacific Women's Informa-



tion Network Centre (APWINC) in Seoul, Korea.<sup>3</sup> Based at Sookmyung Women's University, APWINC's goals of maximising the use of information technology for women matched the objectives of the network. APWINC became the next AWORC member organisation.

Meanwhile in Mongolia during the East Asian Women's Forum, AJWRC had touched base with the Women's Information and Resource Centre (later renamed to Gender Centre for Sustainable Development), a non-governmental organisation actively promoting the use of new information and communication for women's development in Mongolia.<sup>4</sup> WIRC became the eighth member of AWORC. AJWRC also recommended the membership to the network of the Asia Pacific Forum on Law and Development (APWLD), which formally joined AWORC in May 1999.

The agreements and commitment of the network members were specific and clear: to build a common Web-based multi-lingual database and search mechanism, and for each of the member organisations to submit 50 bibliographic records per month.

Everyone thought that was the end of it.

But the past two years witnessed a growth in AWORC that was beyond what everyone expected. AWORC grew to be an active and energetic Internet-based network of women's organisations and resource centres, developing co-operative approaches and partnerships in increasing access to and exploring applications of new information and communication technologies (ICT) for women's social and economic development. It supported national women's organisations, regional women's networks and women's information and communication agencies through the development of electronic information resources, training in electronic networking and building women's capacities in developing electronic and Internet-based services.

## RESOURCE EXCHANGE IN PRACTICE

The activities of the past two years would not have been possible for such a young network without the progressive developments in women's use of ICT. AWORC has done most of its work online, maximising the use of Internet-based information and communication tools. AWORC-Meet is the main mailing list and meeting space of all AWORC members and staff. It is also the



highest decision-making body of the network where discussions are held and agreements made. AWORC is coordinated from Manila, Philippines by Chat Garcia-Ramilo (APC-WNSP) while the full-time project staff is currently being hosted by APWINC in Seoul. Members of the various AWORC Working Groups are spread throughout the region.

### **Cooperative Website Development**

Upon its formation, AWORC set up a Website containing a shared multi-lingual index database and a search engine for accessing the Websites of the network's member organisations. The first version of the AWORC Website was launched in November 1998, during the Know How Conference in Amsterdam. The development of the Site is an example of resource exchange. Hosting was and continues to be jointly provided by JCA-NET and Isis Manila. The original interface design was developed by the JCA-NET's web designer, but when she became too busy to continue with the work, the webmaster of Isis Manila pitched in and finish the implementation of the design.<sup>5</sup> A small group composed of women from Isis Manila and JCA-NET provided constant feedback to the people working on the interface and the database.

The strategy of cooperative Web development continues. In June 2000, the AWORC re-launched its Website with a new interface. Having grown in size and complexity, AWORC decided that its Website needed a new look to reflect the network's growth in terms of membership and activities, and to make it easier for people to use the Website. The Site redesign was led by the Web Working Group composed of Webmasters, Web designers, and users from the different member organisations of AWORC. The Web Working Group, working online through the AWORC-Web-WG mailing list discussed and created the blueprint for the new and improved AWORC Site.<sup>6</sup> This blueprint guided the work of the Communication for Community Organisations (c2o), which was contracted to implement the redesign. The Web Working Group also provided feedback to c2o, helped test the Site and assisted in the transfer of the Site from the development server to the final publishing server. The new version of the AWORC Site was unveiled in June 2000.



## The Beijing Plus Five Initiative

The Five Year Review of the Beijing Platform for Action presented an opportunity for AWORC to be more involved in the regional and international women's movement. In March 1999, as women's groups all over the world prepared for the year-long process review of the Beijing Platform for Action, AWORC launched the Beijing+5 section of its Website. This signalled the start of AWORC's involvement in the process that culminated in the Women 2000 Conference, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) held in New York from 5–9 June 2000,

The Asia Pacific Women 2000 NGO Symposium was held in August 1999 at the Kasetsart University in Bangkok, Thailand as a preparatory meeting for Women 2000. The meeting led to the formation of the Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW), a network that led the review process and lobbying for the region. For this meeting, the AWORC Site's Beijing +5 section played a significant role from start to finish. Preparations for the symposium were supported by the AWORC by making the formal invitations, registration and reservation forms as well as other logistical information about the regional symposium available in the Website's Beijing +5 Section.

During the Symposium, AWORC in collaboration with the Isis Manila Media Team, worked to deliver onsite and online reports for women in the region who were unable to attend. The reports were posted in the AWORC Site's Beijing +5 section, as well as in the APWOMEN2000, an electronic mailing list set-up and managed by Isis Manila to facilitate the distribution of information related to the review of the Beijing Platform for Action. The final report of the symposium was also made available in the Beijing+5 Site, as well as the other lobbying documents that came out of the report.

Through the help of staff of the Kasetsart University, where the regional symposium was held, AWORC was able to run a Public Access Centre where participants could access the Internet. The AWORC team also provided user support and tutorials to symposium participants who dropped by the Public Access Centre.<sup>7</sup>

As the Women 2000 Conference draw nearer, the wealth of information and resources grew as well and AWORC's Beijing+5 site became the site where information that is relevant to the Asia-Pacific could be accessed. Through its Website, AWORC provided onsite reports during various Beijing+5 events such



as the UNESCAP High-level Intergovernmental Meeting in November 1999 and the 44th CSW Session and the Women 2000 Conference in March 2000. The AWORC Beijing+5 Site became one of the first of its kind: a regional NGO Website dedicated to the BPFA review. It became a model for other regions.

### **Women's Electronic Network Training**

To support information sharing and dissemination for the Beijing+5 process within the region, AWORC held the 1999 Asian Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT99) in Sookmyung Women's University from June 21-26. APWINC hosted the event that was attended by 23 women from various organisations involved in the regional BPFA review process. The workshop focused on developing basic web development skills for women. The AWORC training team was formed to lead the preparation for the workshop. The team was composed of women from Asia-Pacific who are involved in Internet-based networking and information work.<sup>8</sup> The training kit and full documentation of WENT99 are available in the AWORC Website and may be used as an ICT training resource.

WENT99 and AWORC's experience in the development of the regional Beijing +5 Website, significantly influenced the strategy for the Global Women's Electronic Network Training Workshop (GWENT). Held at Sookmyung University in October 1999, the GWENT workshop was organised by WomenAction, a global women's information and communication network for the BPFA review. GWENT was attended by women from all over the world who were involved in electronic information-dissemination for the review. The workshop offered 3 tracks: Track 1, Web Design and Maintenance; Track 2, Working Online; and Track 3, Section J. Members of the AWORC Training Team led Track 1, which was targeted towards women working on various regional sites. AWORC has actively participated in WomenAction activities during the 44th CSW and the Women 2000 Conference.

WENT99 also caught the attention of the United Nations Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). A representative from UNESCAP participated in WENT99 as an observer and actively worked to raise funds for the second WENT workshop held in 2000.<sup>9</sup>

The 2000 Asian Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT2000) was held a year after WENT99, again hosted by APWINC in Sookmyung Women's



University. The 31 women from different organisations in Asia and the Pacific included librarians, web designers and information facilitators. WENT2000 had three tracks: Web Planning, Working Online, and Database Building.

Each track was custom-fit for various information skills and needs of women in the region. The AWORC Training Team also grew from WENT2000. Web and database designers who are not members of AWORC, but who have worked with women's organisations in the region were invited to join the AWORC Training Team for WENT2000.<sup>10</sup> During WENT2000, c2o, an Australian organisation working to promote the use of ICT for community organising and solidarity whose members are experts in web development and multi-media communications, collaborated with AWORC on an initiative called Women Onsite Online (WOO). WOO was a collaborative project between the WENT2000 participants and c2o that involved creating a multi-media, web-based documentation of the workshop as well as the live streaming of the International Symposium on Women and ICT held during WENT2000.<sup>11</sup> It also served as a laboratory of sort for participants of WENT2000's Web Track to experience some hands-on techniques in graphics and sound editing, and basic concepts in Web multi-media.

The preparations for the two WENT workshops are prime examples of online coordination. In both workshops, AWORC set up a secretariat whose members are physically based in Manila and Seoul. Working mostly via e-mail, the secretariat divided the tasks and pulled-off two workshops successfully.<sup>12</sup>

The creation of a mailing list of all participants, trainers and staff prior to the each of the workshops has proven to be a valuable practice for WENT. Prior to the training proper, the mailing lists served as a means for the secretariat to coordinate logistical details with participants. Trainees and trainers initially got to know one another through the mailing lists. The online interaction prior to the workshops helped prepare both trainers and trainees to come to the workshops with much goodwill and positive anticipation.

Both the mailing lists for WENT99 and WENT2000 continue to this day. Although not as active as they were immediately after the workshops, the mailing lists have become venues for the graduates and trainers of the WENT to exchange information about women's issues and activities in Asia and the Pacific, to keep one another updated about their work, and to ask and offer help for ICT-related problems.<sup>13</sup>



## **Women and ICT Research**

The latest addition to the growing list of AWORC activities is a research on Women and ICT which is being conducted among women's groups in Asia-Pacific about their involvement in ICT. Through this initiative, AWORC seeks to determine the skills and needs of women in the NGO sector vis-à-vis Internet-based information-dissemination and online networking. Apart from being a valuable resource on women and ICT, the results of the research will be used to guide AWORC in determining future initiatives and strategies.

The AWORC Research Team coordinates the work through the AWORC-Res mailing list and is composed of AWORC members as well as independent researchers contracted for the project.<sup>14</sup>

## **Multi-lingual Database and Search Mechanism**

The development of the AWORC Multi-lingual Database and Search Mechanism is the main strategy of AWORC. The development of the database is led by JCA-NET, while a Thesaurus Working Group working through the AWORC-Thes mailing list leads in the development of the database's thesaurus and coordinates the monthly submission of bibliographic records of the network members.

Since the start of 2000, AWORC has been faced with the tremendous challenge of how to move the multi-lingual database forward given recent developments in Web-enabled databases, as well as the changing capacities and needs of the network's members.

The AWORC Multi-lingual Database has a simple design. Using a template, which was previously agreed upon by the network, member-organisations send their bibliographic records to JCA-NET via email. The records are then uploaded to the online Database.

When the Multi-lingual Database was started, very few of the AWORC members had Websites. And while many of the members had computerised bibliographic databases, these were all offline. In 1998, getting databases online was not only expensive but also technically steep for most women's organisations. However, recent developments have somewhat changed the context for the development of the Multi-lingual Database.



Some of the members of AWORC have started to make plans to make their database available online. Isis Manila, for example, is prototyping a Web-enabled Bibliographic Database that is built on free software. APWINC, on the other hand, has started developing a Web-based Database of Women's Organisations and a Yahoo-type search engine catering specifically to Korean women.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of the development of Web and Database technologies, the last two years have seen the maturing of the Extensible Mark-up Language (XML), a new generation of Web language that allows for easier data and content sharing across the Web. Free software or open source database applications have also matured and have become more user-friendly, offering users viable alternatives to expensive and proprietary software applications and database solutions.

During the face-to-face meeting of AWORC in February 2000, the network members debated on the direction of the development of the Multilingual database. While some argued strongly in favour of using inexpensive and non-proprietary applications, others felt that the best solution is one that is already working.

After much discussion, the network decided that:

- 1) it is not proper for AWORC to impose a specific database strategy to its member organisations since this is contrary to the vision of mutual respect and cooperation;
- 2) all the members of AWORC should be encouraged to computerise their databases;
- 3) the AWORC multi-lingual database will continue to be developed using open source or non-proprietary solutions;
- 4) AWORC must study technical and engineering strategies that will allow the different databases of the members to interact with each other, without imposing uniformity.

This last point is perhaps one of the most important insights to be gleaned from AWORC's first two years. For AWORC, it is becoming clear that the work of developing technology applications or information systems that enable open and free resource sharing among women, also include working to make sure that such applications and systems are themselves open and free.



A mailing list called AWORC-Tech was set up in March 2000 to serve as a venue for discussing more technology-based issues, and as a way for the technicians and technical support workers within AWORC to support each other. Although the mailing list has ran by fits and starts, all members who had requested for help regarding technical problems have received prompt and useful response from other members.

### CRITICAL CHALLENGES

The activities of the past two years would not have been possible without the contributions of the member organisations and individual activists who have collaborated with AWORC. The resources shared across the network — skills and expertise, virtual and physical working spaces, time, organisational and personal support, information — have been invaluable. AWORC members have shown a commitment to the network that has resulted in the development of an online community of women dedicated towards a common goal of enabling women to critically engage new information and communication technology.

Clearly, resource exchange has taken on a broader and deeper meaning for AWORC. Its activities have advanced well beyond the initial idea of sharing bibliographic data through a common database. Behind the Internet-based network of women's organisations, is a real network of individual members, working online and sharing resources in all its forms and definitions. And beyond AWORC, its pioneering work in the area of ICT has benefited other networks of women's organisations and individual activists in Asia and the Pacific.

While celebrating its many gains and successes, AWORC is aware that to remain relevant to the women's movements in Asia and the Pacific the network must respond to the urgent challenges foisted by ICT on women. Two such challenges are the development of a gender perspective in ICT and the reinforcement of a culture favourable to women working with ICT.



## **Urgency of a Gender Perspective in ICT**

In the sea of rapid technological developments, being able to stay afloat and swim against the tide of media hype and conventional wisdom about technology has become a real challenge for women working in ICT.

One of the most important points of intervention for women working in ICT is the policy arena. ICT policies at the international, regional and national levels must be addressed in order to create an appropriate technological culture for women. Without a gender perspective on the issue, new ICTs will continue to develop at a rate and in a direction that is bound to alienate women. Networks such as AWORC, equipped with working experience as well as a theoretical understanding of women and ICT, are well in place to participate in the ICT policy development to ensure that these policies realistically and fully adhere to the needs and realities of women.

It is necessary for AWORC and other similar networks to document their experiences in women's networking. These experiences must find their way into the "negotiating table," the lessons diffused into present and future ICT policies. Furthermore, it is necessary for AWORC to build capacities, within and outside the network that would enable effective participation at the policy arena.

## **Creating a Technological Culture for Women in Asia**

The AWORC experience, while successful, is not all that unique. Other networks all over the world operate and accomplish goals using the same tools and strategies. The achievements of networks like AWORC are due mainly to recent developments in the women's movement. In the last five years, with the 1995 UN World Conference on Women (UNWCW) serving as an impetus to advance women's access to new ICT, a new technological culture has emerged within the women's movement. This culture is demonstrated by many examples of strategies that women's organisations have developed in using communication systems and technologies, as a means of strengthening women's participation in democratic processes.

Still and all, the new technological culture within the movement has paved the way for AWORC's growth. Without such a culture, AWORC would have



been irrelevant in the region and in the women's movement. Furthermore, AWORC would not have grown the way it did or achieved so much in such a short span of time.

AWORC in turn has contributed to the growth of the technological culture for women in the region by facilitating information exchange, by running ICT trainings, by prototyping open and women-friendly ICT tools, and by showing to other women that technology can be grafted with the practice of politics like decision-making and participation. The extensive use of e-mail and mailing lists has enabled members of AWORC to have equal access to the same information and opportunity for participation and decision-making.<sup>16</sup>

In a mailing list, every idea, opinion and piece of information are thrown into the big mailing list of participants. Not being recognised by the chair, a basic tenet in parliamentary procedure, is unknown in a network that convenes and meets not around a table but through an electronic mailing list. The application of such a political and organisational practice is potentially far-ranging.<sup>17</sup>

It is important for AWORC to continue to contribute to this culture by taking a lead in initiatives that would enable more women to access, understand and use new ICT. Furthermore, AWORC must also support similar electronic networking initiatives in the region, offering solidarity and collaborating whenever possible with groups and individuals who are also working for women's empowerment.

When the odds are great, a warm message of solidarity sent across the matrix of bits and bytes may be the one resource that can make women forge on a mile longer than previously thought possible. ○

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The women from AJWRC were Machiko Tomomasas, Makiko Kubota and Hiroko Kotake. Yukika Matsumoto who is a member of JCA-NET came as interpreter.
- 2 JCA-NET's database implementation uses PERL and CGI, both non-proprietary and part of a growing list of free software or open source applications. It should also be noted that explanations provided by the representatives from AJWRC about how the JCA-NET database prototype worked was easily understood by the workshop participants.



- 3 Rhona Baustista and Mylene Soto of Isis Manila met Kiochung Kim of APWINC.
- 4 Machiko Tomomasa, coordinator of AJWRC, along with JCA-NET's Yukika Matsumoto met with Oyuntsegseg Oidov of WIRC.
- 5 The web designer from JCA-NET was Hiroko Kotake who developed the initial design studies for the first version of the AWORC Website. Pi Villanueva, webmaster and system administrator of Isis Manila finished the work. Male technicians from JCA-NET, Yukihiro Nazuda and Hatuka\*nezumi also provided invaluable support to AWORC.
- 6 The Web Working Group led by Justina Curtis of c2o and WNSP worked from June 1999 to January 2000 to come up with a set of documents which specified in detail the goals, objectives, architecture, lay-out, navigational and graphical design, and technical requirements of the redesigned AWORC Site.
- 7 The inspiration for the Public Access Centre and onsite user support and tutorial was the APCWNSP ICT initiative during the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Rhona Bautista who was a member of APCWNSP's Beijing Team led the AWORC's Public Access Centre Team. Other members of the team were Sangkyung Rhee (APWINC), Moon Hyuengjung (APWINC) and Cheekay Cinco (AWORC full-time staff). Other members of AWORC who attended the Symposium representing their base organisations also helped out.
- 8 The members of the AWORC Training Team for WENT99 were: Pi Villanueva (Isis International-Manila and APC-WNSP); Yukika Matsumoto (JCA-NET, femnet and APCWNSP); Justina Curtis (c2o and APCWNSP); Sangkyung Rhee (APWINC); Moon Hyuengjung (APWINC) and Wonsun Shin (APWINC).
- 9 The UNESCAP staff was Yukie Hori who has continued to support AWORC by working to raise funding for WENT. Aside from UNESCAP, other agencies which have generously supported AWORC are Mama Cash, United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Japan Foundation, United Nations Development Programme-Asia Pacific Gender Equality Network (UNDP-APGEN), International Development Research Centre (IDRC) - Pan Asia Networking.
- 10 The members of the AWORC Training Team for WENT200 were: Pi Villanueva (Isis International-Manila and APCWNSP), Justina Curtis (c2o and APCWNSP), Sangkyung Rhee (APWINC), Chat Garcia Ramilo (APCWNSP), Rhona Bautista (Isis International-Manila and APCWNSP), Zailan Rose Kamaruddin (ARROW), Moon Hyunjeong (APWINC), Selenge Tumurbaatar (GCSD), Nani Buntarian, Sarah Escandor, Kim Bounds and Andrew Garton. Nani is an independent activist from Indonesia who specialises in online networking. Sarah is a Database developer and consultant from the Philippines. Kim and Andrew are both from the c2o who came on board for the Women Onsite Online initiative. Buntarian and Kamaruddin are graduates of WENT99.



- 11 The webcasting or live streaming of the International Symposium on Women and ICT pushed through. The archive of the broadcast can be accessed though: [www.women.or.kr/~went2000/live.html](http://www.women.or.kr/~went2000/live.html)

The post-production work for the multi-media documentation of WENT2000 was stalled due to lack of funding. But this problem has been solved, and the multi-media documentation of WENT2000 is expected to be published online sometime on the first quarter of 2001.

- 12 The secretariat is tasked with providing logistical, communication, and administrative support to the selection committee (the group responsible for screening WENT applicants), the training team, and the participants. Although references were sometimes made to a "Seoul secretariat" and a "Manila secretariat," in reality there was only one Secretariat which coordinated its work using e-mail and mailing list primarily.
- 13 In November 2000, AWORC sent out an "action alert" to AWORC-WENT99 and AWORC-WENT2000, the mailing lists of participants of the two WENT workshops. To strengthen its case with one agency with which it was negotiating funding support for WENT2001, AWORC needed to communicate how graduates of the two previous WENT workshops are using the skills they had learned from the training. The response from the WENT graduates was immediate and heart warming. Even some participants who have generally remained quiet in the lists, wrote back to share their experiences after attending WENT.
- 14 The AWORC Research Team consists of Chat Garcia Ramilo (APC-WNSP) and Luz Martinez (Isis International-Manila) who are based in Manila, Yukie Hori (UNESCAP) in Bangkok, and researchers Leelangi Wanasundera in Sri Lanka and Debbie Singh[0] in Fiji.
- 15 The Isis Manila prototype dubbed Web-enabled Information and Library Management System (WILMA) is built on open source technology using PHP, Postgres and Apache. APWINC's Online Database is based on an implementation of the commercially-available Active Bridge System.
- 16 This observation does not disregard the existence of limitations imposed by barriers such as facility in the English language, and variations in the cost of Internet access across Asia and the Pacific.
- 17 While the grafting of ICT onto the practice of human network building is unleashing tremendous creative energies from participants, it is also stirring up discussions and reflections about how far technology should be allowed to alter organisations and the way people in organisations relate with another. The use of ICT has placed significant pressure on the time and resources of organisations and individual women. Women who work online have to regularly get on the Net to find out what is happening in the virtual work spaces and to contribute to the work of the virtual network while staying focused on the work that she does in her base organisation. There are other manifestations of the problems of technol-



ogy and human politics. AWORC as a network has not “sat down” to discuss in depth how the practice of technology affects women’s practice of politics. This is a good subject for future researches.

# *Rumpun e-mail Perempuan/Women's Mailing List* Indonesian Women Find a Virtual Space of Their Own

*Nani Buntarian*

July 1998. Jakarta was scorched and ravaged. The longest-reigning Indonesian president Soeharto stepped down in late May after 32 years of uncontested and uninterrupted rule over the third largest nation in Asia with a population of more than 200 million people.

Suppressed voices found their liberation in the let-loose spirit of the then catch-word of the day, "reformation". The effect was deafening and at many times violent. Demonstrators, military personnel and hooligans ruled the streets of large cities. Taking advantage of fear-stricken citizens, mobs literally helped themselves by looting and straight forward vandalism. The economy simply plunged into a roller-coaster ride with dismal hope of a top.

It was at this grim instance in the recent Indonesian history that women activists emerged with increasingly stronger voices. Silenced during the iron-fisted rule of Soeharto's New Order regime, their voices burst out with such forcefulness when they rallied behind the demand for the military's transparency on hundreds of reported cases of sexual atrocities during the May 1998 riots. Hundreds of ethnic Chinese women were gang-raped and murdered during the burn and loot rampages in Jakarta and in several other cities.

Weeks before the president's resignation, around 75 women activists converged in Jakarta — almost furtively to dodge security authorities - to sign a petition demanding Soeharto's resignation as a precondition in reviving democracy in the country. The women referred to themselves as the Indonesian Women's Coalition for Democracy and Justice.

When Soeharto did finally step down, the coalition's members decided to get together regularly to organise follow-up actions to ensure women's equal share of voice in the decisions made for the future of the country. The meetings took place once a week, on a Wednesday.



These meetings were held at borrowed small rooms, several times at individual's homes with participants "chipping in" for refreshments and snacks. Constantly on the move, the meetings were amazingly steady enough to serve as the hatching ground for the most productive minds in the Indonesian women's movement.

It was during one of those Wednesdays in July 1998, when sparks of ideas filled the crowded room when the suggestion of a "clearing house" was thrown in. If there were decisions taken, they needed to be shared with as many other women activists as possible. With women activists spread across the many islands of the extensive archipelago, it was crucial to identify a means of distributing and exchanging information speedily at the lowest cost. Naturally, the idea of an electronic mailing list as a "virtual clearing house" popped up.

E-mail, along with mobile phone and pager, had played a dominant role in organising the Indonesian activists' movements during the uprising against the "New Order" government. Two of the most active mailing lists were by opposition groups offshore [apakabar] and [SiAR]. E-mail forwards from these mailing lists fly around freely in the local Net space. First contact with a mailing list message for many Indonesian activists was probably made at this time.

Attendance sheets on those Wednesday women's meetings showed that most of the regulars have e-mail addresses. The mailing list started with these and built its bulk as it went along. Since everyone had seemed preoccupied with issues of the real world, no one commented much on the idea of a virtual space. Anything that could help the cause was welcomed. Naturally the person who suggested the idea ended up with the job.

The group had neither money nor home. Everything would have to be practically at no cost. None of the participants had an organisation that ran a server, so a Web-based free mailing list service was the only feasible option. Makelist.com (which eventually became eGroups.com) was randomly chosen on the merits of its visibility and ease. A few other Indonesian mailing lists were already listed on the service. The new set-up, simply called the Rumpun e-mail Perempuan (Women's Mailing List), was launched on 12 July 1998 with a humble user base of 32 subscribers consisting of individual activists and women's organisations.



It took quite a stretch of time for members to acknowledge the value of the mailing list. By consistently and actively inviting new members, the list slowly grew to around 250 subscribers by mid-2000. Owned and maintained by an individual activist with no affiliation to any organisation, the list runs on independent means with the owner limiting herself to the task of gate-keeping and housekeeping.

Never intended to serve as a moderated discussion list, Rumpun e-mail Perempuan was virtually left to grow and shape itself organically as a community. The only common understanding shared to subscribed members has been its description as an Indonesian women's movement electronic networking space. How the members use this space was entirely left open to collective building and process of elimination.

Average monthly message turnover grew from 70 during the second half of 1998 to 193 in 1999, and 269 for the first eight months of 2000, with peak turnover at 379 in June 2000. Content ranges from action alerts, announcements, news clips, statements, press releases, and impromptu discussion topics. A high degree of temperance and selectivity in distribution materials has been voluntarily applied by members to create a space strictly for women's issues and activism. Through time, Indonesian women activists acknowledged the space as a neutral ground and began to call it their own in voicing their minds and hearts freely.

Hearts? This may bewilder women who have been told not to get "personal" on their mailing list. Rumpun e-mail Perempuan seems to defy this restriction. Experience has proven that messages that get the most supportive responses are those which touch the heart. Exchanges on this human level, such as personal messages of condolences to a member activist who has just lost a parent, have served as the most effective way of creating a bond among members of the list.

The luxury to touch each other, and thereby experience virtual bonding with other activists, is essentially the core appeal of Rumpun e-mail Perempuan. It is a space that allows Indonesian women activists to gain a sense of oneness, of being in it together, through every challenge encountered during these times of unpredictability. The human strength that can be drawn from this seemingly fragile virtual body has time and again proved to be valuable to the whole movement. ○

# *Network of East-West Women* Offering Hope in a Time of Upheavals

*Sonia Jaffe Robbins*

The Network of East-West Women (NEWW) received its first grants in the fall of 1994. By spring the next year, NEWW started connecting women's centres in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former Soviet Union. The NEWW Online project began just at the time when the Internet was moving from being a space of mostly researchers, scientists, and computer nerds to a mass medium. But in the region NEWW worked in, access to the Internet varied from easy to practically nonexistent. Much of NEWW's experience, as a women's network working on women's issues may be unique to that particular period of time.

## **GETTING STARTED (1994-1995)**

"Welcome from NEWW New York. Let this be your formal welcome to NEWW Online. I am Sonia Jaffe Robbins, a co-founder of NEWW, the International Steering Committee member from New York City, and NEWW's communication director. I also teach journalism and women's studies part-time at New York University.

"I'm 52 years old, married to Jack, and have a 22-year-old daughter.... [W]hen I step outside the door of my apartment building, I see to my left the green of Riverside Park and to my right, two blocks away, the facade of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (Episcopalian), the largest Gothic cathedral in the world... [a] very atypical New York landscape.

"I am very excited about the NEWW Online project. It is so thrilling to be able to exchange thoughts with friends in Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of FSU and know that they can read and respond in just a few days, or even hours, when formerly it took weeks and weeks, or was a large expense in faxes or telephone calls.



“And you...? Please let us know about you, and what you hope the Online project can accomplish for you and your groups.”

Throughout the winter and early spring of 1995, I sent the above e-mail message from New York City to 30 women’s centres all over the CEE region and the former Soviet Union as they joined the NEWW Online project. This project was a high point in NEWW’s effort to network women activists in the post-communist region.

NEWW began as an informal network of feminist activists, scholars, and journalists in the CEE region and the United States in 1990. A group of American feminists with personal and professional connections in Eastern Europe brought together women in Eastern Europe who were excited by their new political freedoms and economic possibilities, but also alarmed at the growing unemployment of women and the disappearance of women from public space.

In early June 1991, 75 women from 11 countries (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, Britain, Canada, Greece, and the United States) came together for NEWW’s founding conference, in Dubrovnik, then still Yugoslavia, three weeks before war shattered that country. After the collapse of the Communist regime at the end of 1991, NEWW reached out to women in the former Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.

**Central and East European Locations for NEWW Online**

Belgrade, Serbia; Berlin, Germany; Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria; Bratislava, Slovakia; Bucharest, Romania; Budapest, Hungary; Cracow, Poland; Kaluga, Russia; Kemerovo, Russia; Kharkov, Ukraine; Ljubljana, Slovenia; Mirnyi, Russia; Moscow, Russia; Murmansk, Russia; Naberezhnyye Chelny, Tatarstan, Russia; Prishtina, Kosovo/a; Prague, Czech Republic; Riga, Latvia; St. Petersburg, Russia; Sergiev Posad, Russia; Sofia, Bulgaria; Tartu, Estonia; Tirana, Albania; Tver, Russia; Vilnius, Lithuania-Lietuva; Voronezh, Russia; Warsaw, Poland; Zagreb, Croatia; Zenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Over the next years, we invited more and more women to join our growing network and passed on, in hard-copy newsletters, what we learned about feminist activism, conferences, new publications, projects, and resources.

But there were severe limitations to our networking in those early years. Phone calls were not only expensive but required careful planning to take account of the six-to-12-hour time difference between the United States and the region. Fax messaging faced most of the same difficulties, and sometimes even more so due to the intermittent power outages. As a result, we often had to engage in what a consultant called



“suitcase trade” — stuffing the baggage of Western women travelling to, say, Poland or Slovakia or Bulgaria, with books, journals, papers, and other information — to be delivered in person. The NEWW newsletter was going to a larger mailing list with each issue; more information required more pages. The cost of postage and reproduction also kept rising while our funds remained low.

In mid-1993, NEWW’s new director, Shana Penn, began to use office space at ISAR’s office in Washington D.C. ISAR, in conjunction with the Russian Socio-Ecological Union, had conceived and developed an online network using the Internet for the environmental movement in Russia. Seeing how ISAR’s network operated informed Shana and NEWW’s co-founder Ann Snitow about how to use the Internet for women’s organising and networking.

The Internet then was still something of a mystery except for computer experts. But as we learned more about it, we began to think that it seemed designed for NEWW’s mission. E-mail could be written any time and responded to at any time. Cost was minimal in the US and often cheaper than other communication means in East and Central Europe. Documents could be sent as attachments or copied and pasted into e-mail. Much valuable information was already available via gopher and ftp. Moreover, the decentralisation of the Internet was an ideal model for NEWW’s non-hierarchical nature.

In mid-1994, NEWW opened an e-mail account and an electronic conference called WOMEN-East-West with the Institute for Global Communication (IGC), a founding member of the Association for Progressive Communications. Soon after, institutions like World Learning Inc., the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Eurasia Foundation awarded grants to NEWW to connect 28 women’s centres in the region via electronic networking. This project was called NEWW Online, and the centres that were the first batch of participants were those that were already represented in NEWW’s Steering Committee.

## LOCALISING TRAININGS

To equip the women’s centres with the necessary tools, we organised trainings. The first trainers NEWW worked with were Roma Ciesla, a lesbian feminist activist from Cracow, Poland; Galina Venediktova, a Russian program-



mer and activist; and Victoria Vrana, an American with experience in technical work and international non-profit organisations.

The trainers first met some of the participants online and used the e-mail to make logistical arrangements. The training took place over eight weeks at NEWW's US office in Washington, D.C., and consisted primarily of learning about various kinds of hardware and software available in the participants' respective countries; what Internet Service Providers were already operating and who to contact for troubleshooting; how the Internet worked; how to search for information online, and what problems might occur in the course of using electronic networking. ISAR's technical experts, with their extensive knowledge of telecommunications systems in the CEE region provided valuable insights about how to adapt information technology equipment purchased in the US to the requirements of Eastern and Central European systems.

Working with trainers from the CEE region was successful. It helped that the trainers were computer-literate women activists. Trainers from the region knew from their own experience as activists which organisations and people were effective, who were less so. Being also computer-literate, they also understood technical and personnel problems in a way trainers from other regions couldn't. Because the Russian trainer worked primarily in Russia, she had no language barrier to overcome. And the occasional misunderstandings felt in East-West encounters, despite the best intentions, were eliminated with regional trainers.

The technical part of the training worked well, and in some respects the trainees learned by doing. While preparations for the training could have been done in advance, the short time allotted for preparations had the effect of immersing the trainees in the environment they would have to work in when they go back to their countries. The multitude of background information that had to be amassed also reflected the newness of the online situation. In fact much of what the trainees learned during the first NEWW training are no longer used today. Galina Venediktova, the Russian programmer had to struggle with dial-up programs that no longer exist, having to use DOS, and having to search out the few ISPs. Nowadays, Internet access for the most part is far simpler and there are many more ISPs available.

Doing onsite trainings in the region turned out to have excellent results. First, it was less expensive to send one trainer to the region than to have several trainees travel to the West. More importantly, onsite trainings meant



that the trainees learned using hardware and software that are available in their localities. This makes the learning process concrete, and the lessons and skills learned more useful and applicable, respectively. In addition, trainers and trainees also were immediately in touch with groups like Association for Progressive Communications, Glasnet and IREX that provided actual technical support after the training.

A major problem early on was keeping in touch with the newly-connected centres. Because e-mail was new to some degree to all of us, using it was a habit we had to learn. At first, we tried to look for women whose interests were compatible with NEWW's - feminist organising, gender studies, women's rights. But often women who were interested in feminist politics were uninterested in the new technology, or uncomfortable with it. What turned out to be more crucial was to identify women who, though not primarily attracted to NEWW's activist-oriented program, were really keen on learning and using e-mail and electronic communication. Once NEWW found such a woman, her own interest impelled her to get online frequently and to experiment with seeking out or finding the women's resources that were online. Ideally, of course, the online woman was one who understood both the content and the technical aspects of electronic networking. But one positive aspect of training women at the time the Internet was still new was that those who were trained were thrilled to learn something which other people didn't know about. It gave them enhanced status and put them a step forward, often ahead of male colleagues.

Stipends for NEWW's online participants

**From Galina Venediktova, NEWW  
trainer in Russia, Feb. 24, 1995**

"Here the problems are similar to those in Kemerovo. Relcom (telecommunications company) is reliable but practically without Internet access. We looked through the Usenet Newsgroups which they provide and Lena didn't find anything interesting for herself. And Glasnet is practically (unreachable). Yesterday we managed to get Online once and stayed there only for 5 minutes — then we were kicked out. I don't know why. In Kemerovo it was the same. Please send my love to Roma (the other trainer). I am also overwhelmed now and very pressed. The situations are so different everywhere and each moment I have to make decisions and to solve a lot of problems beginning with technical and ending with psychological. I hope when we finish our training program, we'll have time to tell each other our impressions and experience. Please tell Roma I'm thinking of her very often and worrying how is she doing."

**First online message from Tver  
women's group, March 4, 1995**

"Dear sisters! Today we have our e-mail training in Tver. The weather is fine. The sun is shining. Today is Saturday. But we crowd around our computer and can't stop our work. We are so excited about the new possibilities and broad perspectives which we've got thanks to NEWW Online project. Our computer and modem are very powerful and reliable. In few seconds we establish very reliable connection with

*to page 51*



were also an essential element of the project. Especially in countries struggling economically; voluntarism cannot be assumed. Equally, the true cost of living must be taken into account. In some places like Zagreb in Croatia, NEWW had difficulty finding participants because the stipend didn't even cover the cost of being online.

Finally, we wrote a resource guide for using electronic resources for feminist organising. This was one of our most challenging undertakings. Most of those who were expected to use the manual had little experience with computers and being online. The manual was initially published in English and Russian, so many of the women using it were reading a language not their own. Later on, a Polish and a Bulgarian version of the manual were also published. Moreover, while the writers were North Americans, we tried to avoid being US-centric and use examples that are international in context. In addition, the manual had no technical information since every city had different computers, and each ISP had its own software.

The manual consisted of an introduction to the NEWW Online project; a glossary; a brief history of the Internet, e-mail, and electronic communication; a description of the equipment needed; step-by-step directions common to all systems about getting online, downloading e-mail, and handling of e-mail offline; the basics of netiquette; suggestions for integrating e-mail into an office routine; the ubiquitous Frequently Asked Questions or FAQ; a list of women's resources online and suggestions on how they might be used and how online information could be distributed to others; and finally, a list of computer networks and technical support contacts in Central and Eastern Europe and the Newly Independent States (NIS). Graphics were used whenever possible, as well as large headings, bold type, and large numbers for step-by-step notations.

It was extremely useful to have the Russian and Polish trainers work with the American manual writers. The trainers helped edit the manual to ensure that women who are non-native English speakers will be able to understand the manual and also find it useful. They pointed out idioms or figures of speech that were not easily understandable, and raised questions we hadn't thought of. The collaboration between trainers and writers resulted in a number of seemingly simple but very useful modifications in the manual. For example, instead of spelling out the numbers, as is the standard American practice with numbers one to nine, we used numerals. Whenever abbreviations were used,



we spelled out the full name in parentheses - e.g., IGC (Institute for Global Communication) - rather than stick to the American practice of spelling out the full name on first reference only.

## INTERPHASING NEW TECHNOLOGY WITH OLDER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

New technology can leapfrog older forms of communication. In Albania in 1995 and 1996, for example, satellite connections were easier and more reliable than conventional land phone lines and erratic electricity. I once spent several hours unsuccessfully trying to fax the NEWW Online contract to the Albanian participant, as electricity was shut off periodically throughout an afternoon.

But electronic networking does not replace meetings in real space, nor hard-copy publications. We learned this important lesson from the NEWW Online project.

Periodic face-to-face meetings enhanced and strengthened the connections made through the WOMEN-East-West conference. As its facilitator, I found that being able to visualise a face behind an e-mail address made it easier for me to communicate, especially when I had to appeal to someone to participate in a discussion. In addition, tracking down online participants who had not been heard from often required faxes and phone calls since e-mail alone was not sufficient.

Nowadays, if a face-to-face meeting cannot precede electronic networking, photographs can be digitized and uploaded to a Web page or e-mailed to participants. But as long as Web access is not universally available, resource must be allotted to hard-copy publications, or those most needing the information will be left out.

international networks. We are looking forward to working together online in favour of democracy and feminism. Long live NEWW informational technologies for women! Yours in sisterhood, Valentina Uspenskaya, Marina Tsoy, Galina Venediktova”

**From women’s organisation in Murmansk, Kola peninsula, April 3, 1995**

“Dear sisters! We’ve just finished our e-mail training with Galina Venediktova in Murmansk. Today is Sunday. It is still winter in Murmansk. It is very cold, a lot of snow, strong north wind is blowing. But it is warm in our cosy room, moreover, because we all are in a very good mood. We feel very enthusiastic about e-mail. We were so happy to receive your response to our letter, which was our not-very-successful attempt to greet you. The thing is that there is a lot of problems with e-mail in Murmansk. We have to call to Moscow host — there is neither Relcom nor Glasnet host in Murmansk. That’s why our telephone expenses are 40 times more than our e-mail costs.”



## GETTING GOING (1995-PRESENT)

One purpose of connecting women's centres in the region to the Internet was to make all the resources on the Internet accessible to feminist organisers in Eastern Europe. In 1994, when our proposal for NEWW Online was written, these resources consisted of mailing lists (known then generically as Listservs, after a commonly used mailing list program), USENET, and files on public servers available by file transfer protocol (ftp), gopher, and telnet. Search programs like Archie, Veronica, gopher, and WAIS were the primary means of navigating cyberspace. A graphical Web browser was still in its infancy.

But the Internet was already changing rapidly, specially for the US and Western Europe. By the time NEWW's trainers were beginning to connect women's centres to the Internet, the Web was quickly becoming the most used Internet service, with ftp second, and telnet third. (see: <http://www.isoc.org/guest/zakon/Internet/History/HIT.html>).

For many countries in Eastern Europe, however, Internet access of any sort was very new. Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were connected to the Internet only in 1991; Estonia, Latvia, and Slovakia in 1992; Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Romania, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine in 1993; Armenia, Lithuania, and Uzbekistan in 1994; Kyrgyzstan in 1995; and Albania in 1996. Basic e-mail, telnet, and ftp were the most used services by women's centres in this region, and remained so for quite some time.

Not surprisingly, the mailing list which requires only the use of e-mail turned out to be the most significant networking tool of NEWW.

## WOMEN-EAST-WEST

The WOMEN-East-West list began as an electronic bulletin board. Information posted to WOMEN-East-West were mostly calls for papers, announcements about conferences and symposia and job postings. But WOMEN-East-West was also a source of valuable news reports about events and issues in the region. For example, beginning in late 1997 and continuing up to March 1999, Sevdie Ahmeti, NEWW's steering committee member from



Kosovo/a, posted regular reports on the escalating violence in the region.

The reports posted to WOMEN-East-West about the escalating conflict were written and supplied by women living in the areas of conflict. They gave detailed accounts and analyses about the armed conflicts which foreign journalists without deep knowledge of the local climate or necessary language skills were not sensitive enough to notice. These reports continued to come even while major newspapers and broadcast media in the West fell silent about what was happening in places not considered to be within the American purview, where human lives were threatened en masse. When reporting of important world events by commercial media in the US was eclipsed by massive coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and President Bill Clinton's impeachment, WOMEN-East-West continued to be a locus of news and information about the strife-torn East European region and a safe space for people caught in the conflict.

When the NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosovo/a began in March 1999, WOMEN-East-West was inundated with messages. They ranged from arguments for and against the bombing, meditations on what was happening, news reports and commentaries, pleas for support and angry outbursts. This prompted NEWW to start a new list called WOMEN-In-War. The posts generated hotly contested discussions as anti-nationalists and advocates of non-violence from the war zone and from far away, tried to comprehend what was happening and what they felt along with others caught in the violence they had no control over.

## **RESPONDING TO THE CHANGING INFORMATION NEEDS OF WOMEN**

The organisation's first online access was through the Institute for Global Communications, the US provider for the Association for Progressive Communications. The WOMEN-East-West mailing list was the equivalent of the internal electronic conferences available to all IGC subscribers. NEWW originally planned to have many lists on different topics. However, given the structure of IGC's conferences at that time, and the fact that most of NEWW's users were not IGC subscribers, we could only have one list open to any topics.

We envisioned to run different electronic discussions and lists on such



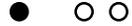
topics as as abortion rights, reproductive health, political action, news alerts. However, if each of these topics was a separate conference, we had to pay a fee to IGC for each one. For subscribers to the mailing list, there would be no way to identify from the subject line which list a message came from.

On the other hand, if NEWW had only one list, each category would become one topic on the conference, and every message about, say, abortion rights, would have only the "Abortion Rights" in the subject line. Those using the conference would know there were new messages only by noting whether the number to the left of the topic was different. One method was too expensive, the other too constricting.

Later circumstances, however, hastened the addition of new lists. NEWW Online was up and running just months before the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the parallel NGO Forum, in September 1995. To respond better to the many e-mail requests for information specifically about activities and participation of women from Central and Eastern Europe and the NIS, we created NEWW-Beijing. Through this list, subscribers shared names of those planning to attend the NGO Forum, contact information, funding information, country reports, travel and accommodation information, and updates about general preparations. The list ran until about a year after the Beijing conference was over.

The NEWW-rights mailing list was created in April 1996, following the conference "The Status of Women in New Market Economies" which brought together legal and economic experts from the CEE and the United States. The conference was sponsored by NEWW, the University of Connecticut School of Law's Office of International Legal Programs, and the Connecticut Journal of International Law organised. Postings to NEWW-rights included bibliographies, relevant publications and text of articles, Internet resources, news reports, organisational profiles, and conference and job announcements.

During the conference, summaries of each session were posted to WOMEN-East-West by the end of the day. Thus, subscribers to the list were able to sit in on the conference panels virtually. But this was basically a one way virtual meeting since the postings mainly came from those who attended the conference. We had hoped that subscribers would also participate by sending comments or raising questions that could be brought up to the conference. Many of the subscribers had only been on the mailing list for a year. We realised



that a vibrant discussion list does not happen overnight. (The postings are archived on Elena Leonoff's Russian Feminism Resources Web page, <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2533/program.html>.)

At NEWW's general membership meeting in Warsaw in November 1998, it became clear that the volume of information distributed by the mailing lists had grown so much that not all members could afford or wanted to receive all the messages in the WOMEN-East-West list. Two new lists were created to accommodate the changing information needs of NEWW: NEWW-Opportunities and NEWW-Academic-Resources. NEWW-Opportunities carried information about job openings, fellowships and scholarships, and funding possibilities for individual women and women's groups. Meanwhile, NEWW-Academic-Resources was set up for announcements about courses and workshops, internships, conferences and calls for papers, teaching opportunities, and academic publications and bibliographies. A third list, WOMEN-In-War, was created in 1999 during the NATO bombings in Serbia and Kosovo/a.

#### Current mailing lists run by NEWW

Archives and instructions for the subscription are available at  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo>

ACADEMIC-Resources  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo/academic-resources>

NEWW-Rights  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo/neww-rights>

Opportunities  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo/opportunities>

WOMEN-East-West  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo/women-east-west>

WOMEN-In-War  
<http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo/women-in-war>

## MANAGING THE LISTS

Managing the different mailing lists is an important part of our day-to-day work. It involves making sure that the lists are running properly and participants are able to use the list with ease.

It is now much easier to manage the mailing lists than it was when NEWW Online began. In those years, periodic technical problems — like a list subscriber going on vacation and storing a vacation message that replied to every list posting and generated a never-ending loop — would overwhelm the list, particularly on a holiday weekend, when the NEWW office was closed.



Until a human being could manually unsubscribe the offending e-mail address from the list, hundreds of messages would pile up. Today, list management softwares are more sophisticated and easier to use.

NEWW's lists have always been unmoderated: messages sent to the list are immediately posted, not vetted by any human being. Hardly any problem occurred, and if they did, the learning experience far outweighed the temporary nuisance caused by the unwanted messages.

In one case, a company looking for East European women to be "mail-order brides" for American men posted a solicitation. This message was denounced by several subscribers. Victoria Vrana, the director of NEWW Online, also posted a message outlining the reasons for NEWW's no-moderator policy: a moderator could shade into censorship, even with the best intentions, and "no censorship" seemed the best antidote for women who had grown up inside societies that had been heavily censored.

In another case, a male university student posted a sexually harassing message, which caused alarm among some subscribers. However, an Internet-savvy subscriber knew how to notify the computer administrator at the student's university, and the student was disciplined. Again, Victoria posted the rationale for "no moderator." To my knowledge, there has never been any call on the part of subscribers to NEWW's list for any form of message screening or moderation.

A more bothersome problem in the early days of the mailing list was people sending messages intended for a specific individual. This stemmed from subscribers' lack of experience with mailing lists and thus their lack of awareness of how to reply directly to an individual instead of to the whole list. Part of the work of the NEWW staff in charge of a particular list was to write to the "offender" to remind her not to send personal emails to the list and to the rest of the subscribers to reiterate basic list etiquette. This problem is seldom encountered now since NEWW participants became more accustomed to using mailing lists and e-mail.

Part of list management is ensuring that participants are able to participate with ease. To promote this, NEWW staffers ensured that messages to the list had appropriate subject line prefixes. Publications were tagged as PUB, announcements ANNC, news as NEWS, to mention a few examples. This method worked only occasionally.



Since the lists were unmoderated, no one could enforce this subject-line convention. (Initially, it worked for NEWW-rights because since all the postings initially came from the NEWW office.) In fact, observing the subject-line conventions was a burden rather than a convenience, especially when a message did not easily fit into an already existing category-prefix.

In March 2000, NEWW changed its mailing list management software to mailman, which has the useful feature of converting email messages into web pages and archiving these on the Web by thread, subject, author, and date. Using mailman has made list management and participation easier. (see: <http://www.neww.org/mailman/listinfo>).

Taking advantage of technological innovations has enabled NEWW to extend the reach of its information resources. For residents of many post-totalitarian societies, the Internet is now the only affordable connection with the outside world. With the continuing decline of economic conditions in many parts of CEE, communication facilities like phone and fax have become too costly. (Ditto, owning a personal computer and modem.) On the other hand, Internet access through cybercafes and similar facilities has become quite common and popular. By making its information-rich mailing list archives accessible via its Website, NEWW is reaching out to those whose main, if not sole connection with the rest of the world is through the World Wide Web.

## **RUNNING E-MAIL MEETINGS**

Electronic networking among women's organisations was so new in 1995 that little or no materials were available about how to hold online meetings using only low technical resources. The means available at that time for real-time Internet gatherings, (Internet Relay Chat, dedicated software for live Web meetings, instant messaging software for chat rooms) were not open to NEWW because of time-zone differences, financial limitations, and the wide variety of Internet connections and services accessible in East and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. We couldn't all meet at the same time and Web access was either prohibitively expensive or not even obtainable in many cities.

We had to find a way to conduct a meeting not in real-time but in "slow motion," through e-mail. Holding such a meeting involved calculating the best dates (we determined that six weeks were the optimal length of time for



**Five Basic Steps  
of Running a Meeting via E-mail**

taken from the "Breaking New Ground: Moderating Online Meetings" by Sonia Jaffe Robinson in Shana Penn's book, *The Women's Guide to the Wired World* (Feminist Press, 1997)

1. Coordinating responsibilities delegating tasks among the moderator or moderators, the technical facilitator, vote talliers, assistants, etc.
2. Making an agenda deciding what to talk about
3. Wielding the electronic gavel getting the meeting started, keeping it going, keeping it civil
4. Facilitating communication reading the messages of meeting participants, adjusting the agenda when necessary, clarifying issues
5. Writing the moderator's summaries moving the meeting along and bringing it to a close

an e-mail meeting); soliciting and then disseminating agenda topics; posing questions for discussion; collecting, summarising, and reporting the responses and generating more discussion questions or issues; presenting issues to a vote, and compiling the results; and preparing the final meeting summary, which ideally would point the way toward actions to be taken and topics requiring further study and discussion by future meetings.

For the first e-mail meeting of NEWW, we did an extensive documentation on how we expected the meeting to progress and how to meet these expectations. We also provided biographical information about each of the participants, background information about NEWW and its projects, and a glossary of technical words and e-mail jargons (like ASAP, FYI, IMO, RE, and SMILEYS).

An e-mail meeting may sound like a leisurely enterprise: checking into your e-mail a few times a day, reading and/or printing out the messages from the meeting, and sending off your own response. From the participants' point of view, it was often too leisurely in fact that it became too easy to forget to respond in a timely way and too hard to keep a discussion of several weeks' length in your mind.

For the moderator, however, running a meeting through e-mail is enormous work. She needs to attend to myriad tasks: read every message immediately, answer any immediate questions or problems a participant has, keep track of who is participating and who isn't, prompt those who haven't responded (this can feel like an unpleasant duty, like being a nagging mother or an authoritarian figure), pay attention to possible subtexts in messages that might annoy or offend other participants, respond promptly to keep discussion moving, diplomatically close a spirited discussion if it is taking over the



meeting, and summarise the discussion and any decisions made.

In addition, the moderator also needs to mind the technical requirements of running a successful meeting. For example, software running the meeting (either mailing list software or Web forum software) must be set up properly since technical difficulties can crop up at any time, like a server going down, someone's e-mail address ceasing to work, error messages flooding the mailbox. We found that it was useful to have two people working together to ensure the smooth running of the meeting — a technical facilitator to sort out the technical problems and a moderating facilitator to concentrate on the flow and substance of the meeting.

The technical problems may have been more complicated when NEWW first held its e-mail meetings because mass use of the Internet was still quite new. Nowadays, Web-based forums work more smoothly and are more widely accessible. But it is still worthwhile to have a technical person available for the inevitable glitches.

E-mail meetings do not substitute for face-to-face meetings. Meeting electronically works better when people already know each other, and is an effective way of preparing for a face-to-face meetings.

E-mail meetings are hard work for everyone, but they are exciting as well. As I wrote in "Breaking New Ground": "When a moderator checks her e-mail each day and sees all the responses coming in, she can feel like the hub of a magically working, invisible sisterhood. So when you come home tired to a full mailbox, remember this: pulled together by electrons, bits and bytes, our words whirring silently over the telephone wires, we are using this technology to knit together our own empowerment."

## THE NEWW WEBSITE

The NEWW Website has gone through three or four redesigns since it was first put up in 1996. It functions primarily as an information source and as an outreach tool. Women in the NIS and CEE regions have learned about NEWW from the Website. Some women who have dropped by the NEWW offices when they came to the US said that they found our street address from Website. The dynamic and interactive features of the Website also supplement NEWW's mailing lists which are still the primary points of interaction of the network.



The lack of mainstream media coverage of the armed conflict in Kosovo/a led NEWW to revamp its Website in June 1998, to add a special Kosov@ Web section to make the information generated by our mailing lists available to the general public worldwide. The redesign also included installing a hit counter which identified as many as 100 visitors per day from around the world and opening a “message board” or Web conference feature so Site visitors can read and respond to comments from other visitors.

The message board provided a critical link between people in the conflict areas and those outside. Messages were posted asking for assistance in locating and contacting lost and displaced family members and friends. Other messages provided outlets for compassion and anger from the anonymous public. For Site visitors who had never visited the Balkans before, or did not understand the historical context of contemporary clashes, the message board revealed the “writing on the wall” and provided a crash course on the depth

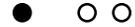
### Helpful Hints for Facilitators of Electronic Meetings

We learned many useful skills and for running electronic meetings. To the more technically-savvy women today, our insights may sound like standard procedure already, but when we first started holding electronic meetings we practically learned from scratch.

1. Spell out the who, what, when, where and how. Be very clear about the agenda and the schedule of the meeting. Mark the start of the meeting, the days during which discussion will take place, the day for votes or reaching consensus, the day for the final meeting report and adjournment, and the dates when the moderator will be unavailable. Inform everybody about who will be participating, and the reasons why expected participants will be absent.
2. Be clear about the ground rules. Just like in face-to-face meetings, an electronic meeting should have rules and guidelines about procedures

and confidentiality. For example, can e-mail meetings be “observed” by other members of the organisation, or should they be private, only viewable by meeting participants? (NEWW’s meetings were open.) Can meeting participants e-mail each other privately about meeting issues, or should all meeting discussions be kept open to all meeting participants? (NEWW did not prevent private discussions of meetings issues.)

3. Prepare the participants. Aside from the agenda and the schedule of the meeting, provide any background documents or resources which the participants need to read before the meeting formally begins. Be sure to ask participants to confirm that they have received everything the moderator has sent out.
4. Printing the messages can help. It helps to print out each meeting message, and it’s particularly important to do this when tallying votes. If staff is available, an assistant can make the printouts and put them in a notebook for the moderator, and



and breadth of the ethnocentric and nationalistic attitudes that fuel conflicts in countries in the CEE and NIS.

Along with the message board, another valuable resource is the Web archive of the Women-In-War mailing list. (see: <http://www.neww.org/kosova/Opinions/opinions.htm>). The Web archive also includes the Centre for the Protection of Women and Children's "Chronicle of the Week", which were posted by Sevdije Ahmeti, NEWW's Online connection in Kosovo/a. These postings dating from May 1998 to March 1999 were based on investigations and information collected by the staff members of the Centre for the Protection of Women and Children, who frequently risked their lives to provide medical attention to civilians caught in the strife and to take testimonies of victims of human rights violations. (see: <http://www.neww.org/kosova/kosovapg2.htm>)

Through our Website, NEWW is able to support the work of organisations who are finding ingenious uses of global communication systems to put up

alert the moderator of any problems or questions in the meeting messages. The assistant can also be responsible for saving the messages on disk and keeping a chart of who has responded to which agenda item.

5. Evoke, don't provoke.

In an e-mail meeting, it is particularly important to actively and energetically solicit contributions from meeting participants, unless the consensus of the participants is to allow the moderator to set the agenda. The process of bottom-up participation is important to set at the beginning, otherwise, the e-mail meeting will feel like no more than a rubber-stamp.

6. Say Welcome and Thank you.

As each participant sends an e-mail signing in to the meeting, a simple "welcome" and "thank you" from the moderator shows the participant that there is someone out there listening/reading.

7. Keep focused.

The moderator needs to keep focused on the flow of

the discussion, the substance of the messages, and so many other things that affect the meeting.

8. Facilitate, don't manipulate.

The role of the moderator is to facilitate communication. After a while, online meetings can tend to be cluttered. To prevent this from happening, the moderator may need to summarise the discussion periodically. The summary should point out clearly the points of agreement and disagreement, note the important issues that cropped up during the discussion but which were not on the agenda, and identify decisions that need to be made and those that have been clearly reached already. If a decision was made to create working groups or committees, the moderator must ensure that there are volunteers for the groups or that a mechanism is established for naming people to the groups.



political resistance. For example, we actively promoted through the Website, Radio 21 (<http://www.radio21.net>), an indigenous Kosovar information resource supported by NEWW's Website. Radio 21 is an Internet-based radio station founded by Aferdita Kelmendi and Xheraldina Vula in response to the government crackdown on Albanian language broadcast media. The station transmitted daily news reports across Europe through the television satellite audio frequency used by BBC World News, until the staff was forced out of Kosovo/a at gunpoint. From Macedonia, Radio 21 resumed transmissions through shortwave radio and other broadcast channels.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sourcing funds to sustain NEWW's electronic networking has not been so easy to maintain. As Erin Barclay, NEWW executive director, and Galina Venediktova said at a panel sponsored by ISAR and IREX on December 9, 1999 (<http://www.isar.org/isar/irexforum.html>), donors now assume that communications technology is a given for all NGOs, and like the telephone and other core operating expenses, donors generally do not fund communications technology specifically. But online connections and equipment are still expensive in CEE and NIS, and the time spent by women in running these networks also needs support, especially in countries where women's unemployment is still high. Venediktova, in a telephone interview said that only OSI's Women's Regional Network director, Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck from Russia, understands that technology needs to be funded.

Another expense is translation. Most materials on the Internet are in English, and this is true for women's materials as well. For as long as materials are available only in English, these will have less impact and reach far fewer women than if they were available in local languages. Good translations require extensive time and translators' time must be paid for.

But when local translations can be done, the reach of NEWW Online immensely extended. The Centre for Feminist Analysis in Bucharest, for example, prepared monthly packets of materials received from WOMEN-East-West, translated articles into Romanian and mailed them to 30 women's groups throughout Romania. The Association of Independent Women's Initiatives in Tver,



Russia, broadcasts information from WOMEN-East-West in Russian on a local radio program. Both these efforts illustrate the importance of providing material and information in the languages of those who will use it.

Hard-copies of the information posted on mailing lists and Websites are also necessary to spread information beyond the reach of those with Internet connections. Universal Internet access is far from a fact even in Western countries. In CEE and NIS, access is much less common. For women's networking to reach beyond the urban, English-speaking elites, the information it produces must be translated and disseminated in paper copies, or through other media. The costs of paper, printing or xeroxing, and postage can be high and must be budgeted for. Online networking does not replace the usual methods of postal mail, it only supplements. Expenses for hard-copy mailings can't be eliminated, but they can be reduced, through online mailings.

It is necessary to get funding support for a person to monitor and update the Website since maintaining an up-to-date Website is essential for networking and for keeping a reputation as a source of reliable information. For the past few years, lack of regular funding for this work has made us rely greatly on volunteers who have performed valiantly.



In 1994, NEWW adopted the use of ICT in its networking strategy. It has never looked back since. NEWW has shown that technology, a force that historically divided the world between East and West, can unite women and enable them to meet the challenges of a changed and changing world. ○



### **Women's Internet Resources in the Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union**

We apologise to those whose web sites didn't get into our internet search and are not mentioned. All resources are in English unless otherwise noted.

#### Online Articles and Publications

The Balkans wing of Women in Black  
<http://wib.matriz.net/balkansnet/women> -

The Role of Women in the Balkan War  
<http://www.igc.apc.org/balkans/women1.html>

Publication of the International Organisation  
on Migration [http://www.iom.int/iom/Publications/  
Trafficking\\_in\\_Migrants.htm](http://www.iom.int/iom/Publications/Trafficking_in_Migrants.htm)

Directory of women's organisations in the post-com-  
munist region  
<http://www.neww.org/countries/countries.htm>

#### Websites

##### *Abania*

Women's Documentation & Information Center [http://  
www.neww.org/countries/Albania/wctirana.htm](http://www.neww.org/countries/Albania/wctirana.htm)  
The Albanian Woman Federation [http://www.icc-al.org/  
~fqsh/](http://www.icc-al.org/~fqsh/) (accessible only to members)

##### *Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan Women's Rights [http://www.ilhr.org/reports/  
azerbaijan/azerbaijan.html](http://www.ilhr.org/reports/azerbaijan/azerbaijan.html)

##### *Bosnia*

Medica Zenica [http://www.medicamondiale.org/  
zenica.html](http://www.medicamondiale.org/zenica.html) (in German)

##### *Bulgaria*

Women's Alliance for Development  
<http://www.geocities.com/woalde/> (Also in Bulgarian  
and Russian)

Women's Health Initiative in Bulgaria  
<http://homepages.go.com/homepages/w/h/i/whibg/>

Bulgarian Association of University Women (BAUW)  
<http://www.ifuw.org/bulgaria/>

##### *Croatia*

Women's Ad Hoc Coalition for Monitoring the Croatian  
Elections <http://www.zamir.net/~adhoc/eng.htm>

Women's Infoteka Women's center and library [http://  
www.zamir.net/~zinfo/](http://www.zamir.net/~zinfo/) (in Croatian and English)

B.a.B.e. - Be active, Be emancipated, Women's human  
rights organisation <http://www.babe.hr> (in Croatian and  
English)

Centre for Women's Studies [http://www.zamir.net/  
~zenstud](http://www.zamir.net/~zenstud/) (in Croatian and English)

NONA Multimedia Women's Center & Gallery [http://  
www.videodocument.org/nona/](http://www.videodocument.org/nona/)



CROW Croatia women's e-zine <http://www.4net.hr/crow/crowomhr.htm> (in Croatian and English)

Czechoslovakia  
Prague Center for Gender Studies (in Czech)

ProFem <http://www.profem.cz/> (in Czech)

*Kazakhstan*

Businesswomen's Association of Kazakhstan <http://www.kazwomen.nursat.kz/eng/about.html>

*Kosovo/a*

Medica Kosova <http://www.medicamondiale.org/kosova.html>

Kosov@ Media Project www: <http://www.radio21.net/mediaproject>

*Poland*

Oska National Women's Information Center <http://www.oska.org.pl/> (in Polish and English)

Women's Rights Center <http://free.ngo.pl/temida/>

Polish language <http://free.ngo.pl/temida/contents.htm>

Women's Center eFKa <http://www.efka.org.pl/> (in Polish and English)

*Romania*

ANA/Center for Feminist Studies <http://www.anasaf.ro/> (in Romanian and English)

Women's National Confederation <http://www.cnfr.ro/indexr.htm>

Accept <http://accept.org.ro/english.html#page2> (in Romanian and English)

*Russian Federation*

Moscow Center for Gender Studies <http://www.neww.org/fsuwomen/moscow.htm>

Russian Feminism Resources  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/2533/russfem.html>

*Slovenia*

Women's Policy Office <http://www.uzp-rs.si/>

League of Professional Women <http://www.lpw.kiev.ua/>

# *Latin America and the Caribbean* Electronic Networking in the Women's Movement

*Dafne Sabanes Plou*

*based on reports by Sally Burch, Susana Rostagniol, Beatriz Cavazos Siller,  
Irene León, Virtudes Berroa and Cristina Zurutuza.*

The APC Women's Networking Support Programme-Latin America (APCWNSP-LA) began as an initiative of the global APCWNSP in 1993 to forge strong regional and local networking that could serve as a model to others in the Southern hemisphere. Latin America was ripe for such an undertaking, not least because the women's movement was very active in the region. The presence of seven APC members in Latin America assured a relatively strong organisational and technical support for women's networking initiatives. It helped too that Internet connectivity was more advanced than in other regions in the South.

At the beginning, the APCWNSP-LA was coordinated from Ecuador, with the sponsorship of Intercom/Ecuanex, an APC member, and the cooperation of the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información or Latin American Information Agency (ALAI).

The APCWNSP-LA started its work by raising the awareness of members of women's organisations about the importance of getting hold of electronic networking as a means for empowerment. At first, it offered answers to the organisations' needs and technical training, but soon it started to build a reputation as a source of interesting proposals in the strategic use of information and communication technology (ICT) from a gender perspective.

The women's networks within APC members in the region actively promoted this new initiative. Those who were most active were the women's networks in Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Nicaragua (with links to Central America) and Uruguay. The women involved contributed with their experience and knowledge. The team, most of whose members worked as volunteers in the programme, included technicians, trainers and journalists.



The APCWNSP-LA focused itself in the South to contribute in bridging the technological and information gaps in societies. From the very start, the four key areas of work of the global and regional APCWNSP's have always been the promotion of women's access to electronic networks; the design and implementation of training from a gender perspective; the facilitation of information flows among women; and the development of policy positions, advocacy initiatives and research on gender and new technologies.

The APCWNSP-LA asserted that ICTs are not mere channels for transmission of information, but constitute the first tool that allows real network communication. As such, ICTs can empower the work of social networks. The network also argued that the Internet is a site of struggle, an arena for strategic interventions. Women need to contest this site to prevent further marginalisation. When women access new technologies, they become owners of tools that could help them to overcome gender inequalities in the communications and technological fields. Moreover, women's access to electronic networks means access to information sources and interchange channels, which are crucial for democratic participation.

Using this framework, the APCWNSP-LA started to relate itself to the issue of the democratisation of communications, understanding that democracy is not only having a vote, but more than that, promoting citizens' active participation in decision-making.

### FIRST STEPS

The social movements in the first half of the 1990's had scarce connectivity and resources. To address this, the APCWNSP-LA focused itself in supporting the efforts of organisations to distribute their information through the electronic networks, and to download online information and repackage this for offline distribution.

Great efforts were dedicated in raising awareness of members of women's organisations about electronic networking and its potentials for enhancing social action. The APCWNSP-LA seized the opportunity given by the United Nations World Conference on Women (UNWCW) in 1995 to promote its aims. Women and their organisations needed information about the Conference and the issues that will be tackled there. They needed to be interconnected



regionally and globally to be able to create a strong force to make governments commit to policy proposals coming from the women's movement. The network encouraged the organisation of distribution networks, within and outside the Internet, which could operate during the Conference.

The information strategy of APCWNSP-LA focused on demonstrating the potentials of electronic networks while adapting ways to overcome their main disadvantages, namely information overload and disorder. The network facilitated and organised key information in Spanish and Portuguese on the FWCW, and translated and wrote abstracts of information that was available in English. Trainings were conducted that aimed to promote regional exchange, and to equip participants with technical skills as well as information and communication skills for using the electronic networks.

The APCWNSP-LA also aimed at becoming a resource for communication policy issues that would be recognised by the women's movement. It worked on developing policy proposals in the gender and communications field and addressing global policy-making arenas.

As a result of these policies and strategies, many women and women's organisations in the region learned about the importance of the Internet and its use in enhancing the work of social movements. Women's organisations in the region also benefited from the efforts of APCWNSP-LA to promote ICT training with a gender perspective and to develop strategic uses of Internet tools as well as connectivity initiatives.

### **DISCOVERING ELECTRONIC NETWORKING AS AN EFFICIENT TOOL**

Most of the national and sub-regional women's NGOs were connected to the Internet during the UNWCW. This facilitated the coordination of their work towards the Conference. Moreover, many women's networks began to be linked together, and in the process discovered that electronic networking was a very effective and efficient tool for organising their work, agendas and plans. Many organisations also became aware of the need to be connected electronically to avoid being marginalised from the UNWCW process since much information was distributed through the electronic networks.



The APCWNSP-LA worked to articulate networks at a national level, so that those that did not have access to electronic networks would get the information they needed through other means of communication like fax, printed bulletins and radio. This approach was particularly successful in Mexico, Central America and Brazil. It encouraged a rapid increase in connectivity and training.

At the regional level, six electronic conferences were created for information exchange. Several communication networks contributed to these conferences like ALAI's Women's Programme, CIMAC and SIPAM from Mexico, Cotidiano Mujer from Uruguay, and Isis Internacional-Chile. In 1995, the APCWNSP-LA also created an information service in Spanish to disseminate key documents and to produce pointers on how to find information on the Internet.

During the regional Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) meeting for UNWCW that took place in Mar del Plata in Argentina in 1994, a group of women's communication NGOs came together to produce daily information bulletins that were sent to electronic networks around the continent. In this way, women's organisations became more interested in the UNWCW process and were able to follow on a daily basis the discussions in the Prepcom. Many alternative media also became aware of the importance of the debate and started to disseminate news and information contents that differed from those produced by mainstream international and local news agencies. Thanks to this effort, online information flow in Spanish and Portuguese was larger than during other the other major UN global conferences in the 1990s.

## OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Access to the Internet in the region has changed dramatically in the last five years. Still, most of the women's organisations in Latin America do not have Internet access. In the 1996 study of the APCWNSP on women and ICT, women's organisations in Latin America pointed to several obstacles to electronic networking: the predominance of the use of English in the Internet; the high cost of personal computers and connectivity, specially in rural areas; the lack of ICT training; and the lack of access to telephone lines.

To reach more groups, the APCWNSP-LA offered information in a variety of formats, and using a different means of distribution. Combining machine



and human resources, the network searched for relevant information in the electronic networks, and translated and repackaged these into abstracts, news and radio bulletins, articles, guides and pointers which were distributed to women's organisations in the region through e-mail, fax, post and walls.

The APCWNSP-LA demonstrated that it is not always necessary to have the latest computing equipment to do effective networking and information work. Through effective use of e-mail, one computer was often all that it took to allow dozens of organisations to access information faster and at a lower cost.

This active flow of information and communication among women in the region encouraged women's organisations to do better advocacy and lobbying work regionally as well as globally.

## **ELECTRONIC NETWORKING IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT**

The strength of APCWNSP-LA lies in the commitment and passion of women who work as part of or alongside the network. Many of the women and organisations that have pioneered the use of electronic networking in social movement building in Latin America have been either members or partners of the APCWNSP-LA.

### **Modemmujer**

One of the first women's networks in the region to use e-mail to disseminate information and to work with their constituency was Modemmujer. In 1992, Beatriz Cavazos Siller, from Mexico, one of the co-founders of Modemmujer, a successful information network in the region, started to use e-mail to send information to Yucatan, in the south of the country, where women's organisations felt isolated and had very little access to any kind of information. E-mail was seen as a cheap means of communication in contrast to the cost of telephone calls, faxes and post.

In 1995, a few weeks before the UNWCW started, Modemmujer launched its information campaign with a small e-mail infrastructure and some training



sessions to enable its members to work effectively. During the UNWCW, 15 Modemmujer correspondents in different parts of Mexico received information from women participating in the UNWCW and redistributed this to other women's organisations through e-mail, fax, press conferences, in print and group meetings.

Modemmujer's UNWCW initiative became a big success, not only in Mexico, but also throughout the Latin American continent. Since then, Modemmujer has built a reputation for effectively adapting electronic tools, integrating this with other tools and using a warm and personal style in their communication work. Their work has encouraged participation, intercommunication and linkage among individual women and women's organisations. Through its training activities, Modemmujer has helped prepare women to effectively use ICT and to raise their awareness about the importance of women's ownership of technology.

A key to Modemmujer's success was the work of its correspondents who transmitted news, UN documents, analyses, policy proposals and recommendations generated by the women's movement. Women who received information from Modemmujer were not only informed about the who, what, where and when of the UNWCW. More importantly, they were able to know about the issues being discussed in the UNWCW and the efforts and interventions of women's organisations.

Modemmujer continues to work to provide women access to information and communication tools. Its information and documentation services reach about 1,000 people.

### **Red de Educacion Popular Entre Mujeres de America Latina y el Caribe**

Red de Educacion Popular Entre Mujeres de America Latina y el Caribe or REPEM is a regional network of women journalists who adapted the use of e-mail to allow them to work together and to reach a large number of readers at low costs. Because of the extent of its members' networking, REPEM daily receives a lot of information that was circulated within the network. Later, however, the network decided to repackage the information into a bulletin which was distributed through e-mail not only in Latin America and the Caribbean but also to other regions.



The bulletin, called *La Red Va* (The Network Moves Forward), contains articles and information critical of government policies as well as policy proposals and advocacy positions of women's organisations. To counter the popular impression that women's activists can only criticise but not create anything productive, *La Red Va* devotes a sizeable space to cover the gains and successes of the women's movement and the advancement of women in society.

At present, most of the staff in charge of the *La Red Va* are young people who do their work always in consultation with other members. About 900 people in Latin America and the Caribbean receive the bulletin regularly. But, as it happens with *Modemmujer*, many of those who receive *La Red Va* redistribute it to their own constituencies and contacts. With their help, REPEM's bulletin reaches women and communities that have no access to electronic mail. *La Red Va's* readers include schoolteachers, university professors, women politicians and members of town halls' chambers.

REPEM's work is grounded on the idea that information wants to be free, that no one has the right to keep information in a few hands and that everyone has a right to access to information. At the same time, *La Red Va* subscribers are encouraged to participate in the information networking by sending information about their organisation's activities, campaigns and projects.

Like *Modemmujer*, REPEM also sent out their information using a simple format. *La Red Va* also included a section on training to encourage women's confidence in using ICTs. With support from the Gender and Education Office of the International Council of Adult Education, REPEM also publishes a monthly electronic bulletin in English, with emphasis on education.

REPEM worked actively during the World Summit on Social Development in 1994 and the UNWCW. Recently, it launched the First Latin American Contest of Non-Sexist Children Stories to help promote non-sexist education in the region. Some 230 stories were submitted to the contest. The network has also earned citations particularly for its participation in the radio campaign on "Women's Rights are Human Rights," led by AMARC (community radio stations) in the region; and for its support to women in Venezuela during the National Constitutional Convention in December 1999.



## **Women's Programme of ALAI**

The Women's Programme of the Agencia Latino-Americana de Información (ALAI), with headquarters in Ecuador, was set up in the early 1990s to respond to the need to develop a feminist stance vis-à-vis the challenges of the globalisation of communication. The Programme worked mainly in developing gender perspective in communication issues, advancing democratisation of communication, and promoting respect for diversity of citizens' participation. Its leadership considered communication and access to information as indispensable resources to guarantee women's work in all spheres and levels of society.

The Programme emphasises women's right to communication and the need to develop communication policies and strategies to promote women's social leadership. This feminist approach considers women as subjects, not objects, of communication and pushes the equal participation of women in decision-making in media, the use of non-sexist language, and the projection of images that reflect women's diverse roles in society.

ALAI's Women's Programme has worked steadily and consistently in developing a cohesive feminist analysis of communication and in raising the awareness of activists and policymakers alike.

on the importance of women's access to information and communication as a requisite in participatory democracy. ALAI's Women's Programme was actively involved in the formation of the APCWNSP-LA.

## **Comite de America Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa delos Derechos dela Mujer**

Another interesting example of women's electronic networking in Latin America is the Latin American Commission for Women's Rights (CLADEM) founded in 1987 to advance women's legal and constitutional rights through information exchange, legal and policy advocacy and mass campaigns. CLADEM's members — women between the ages of 30 and 50 — include lawyers, academics, professionals and activists. Its national offices in 17 Latin American countries, while receiving technical and human resources and other support from the Peru-based central office, operate autonomously. From 1991



to 1998, CLADEM worked hard on the Declaration of Women's Human Rights. Currently, it is actively working towards holding an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

CLADEM adapted the use of electronic networking to enhance their information dissemination work. Since 1998, the central office regularly sends its national partners bulletins (almost 130 during the year), documents, researches, proposals and information packets about developments on legal issues in the region. It's documentation centre produces high quality dossiers which are also distributed electronically. ICTs have become an important tool for CLADEM's lawyers and professionals. It's coordinating committee which meets face-to-face only once a year uses e-mail to coordinate its work, to make prompt collective decisions, and to enhance the practice of internal democracy within the whole network.

CLADEM also integrated ICT into its national and regional action campaigns by using e-mail to circulate calls for urgent actions and appeals for solidarity. E-mail for example was used to gather signatures of support for the Declaration of Women's Human Rights. This document, along with the signatures was presented to the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The document was accepted by the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and is now tabled for discussion.

CLADEM has used electronic mailing lists where members discuss and debate ideas and proposals, analyse situations and make decisions by consensus as much as possible or by votation when necessary. It has also created a Website as an additional tool for communication and networking.

### **Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action**

In the Caribbean, the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA), an organisation of Afro-Caribbean women, has worked hard on social issues from a gender perspective.

Information dissemination is quite hard in the Caribbean since many of the small island-nations lack proper telephone lines and other communication infrastructures. Still CAFRA recognised that ICTs are an important tool to advance its work. Its committee of 30 members, for example, use new tech-



nologies to exchange information and to coordinate their work.

To reach many women, CAFRA has combined electronic communication tools like e-mail with more traditional forms like printed newsletters and radio - the two most popular media in the Caribbean islands. It has also worked closely with grass-roots organisations to bring information to women in small towns and rural villages.

CAFRA has participated actively in many regional and nationally-based campaigns and networking initiatives like the Eight Feminist Encounter in November 1999. In the Dominican Republic, it played a leading role in the public campaign for the creation of a State Secretariat for Women.

The experience of women's organisations and networks in Latin America and the Caribbean shows that ICT can be an effective tool to enhance their social and political activism. In the process these organisations have contributed in strengthening the women's movements in the region as well as in developing feminist analysis and practice in the area of information and communication.



Notwithstanding their many successes in the use of ICTs, these organisations and networks recognise that women still face many barriers. Language, for example, is still a big issue. Although Spanish-language content in the Internet is growing at a fast rate, Latin American women still strongly feel the predominance of the English language not only in terms of content but also in terms of available softwares. Social class, education and age still determine access to ICTs. Poverty and the failure of governments to provide basic social and physical infrastructures like telephone lines and electricity have prevented the faster dispersion of electronic communication tools. Women also strongly feel that governments have failed to adequately respond to the growing demands in promoting public policies to educate and train women and other marginalised social groups in the use of ICTs. The commercialisation of the Internet and the proliferation of junk information are also seen as factors that tend to turn off women from using ICTs.

Women, when they connect for the first time to the Internet or other forms of electronic networks, usually fare better than their expectations. In fact, as



the examples shown here illustrate, women and their organisations that have appropriated ICTs have used their privileged position of being online to actively advocate for the rights of all women to communicate and to have access to the means to communicate. ○

## *2 Stories from Ecuador*

# Finding One's Voice through the Internet

*Karin Delgadillo*

One of the greatest challenges facing Latin America, and Ecuador in particular, is the high cost of telecommunications infrastructure. If we consider that the minimum monthly wage in Latin America is currently US\$30.00, then it is clear that many of the groups we serve barely eke out a living. In other words, they struggle to find ways to feed their families day to day and do not have the luxury to think about tomorrow.

Telecentres are one way to begin to bridge the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. Telecentres are community access points to the Internet, housing between one to ten computers with modem access to an Internet service provider. Community members receive orientation and training on how to use these tools to improve their lives in the ways they see fit.

But the telecentres do not only respond to the communication and information needs of the community. Instead, they are also an instrument for measuring the impact telecommunication tools have in advancing social equity and economic development at the grassroots.

Women's roles in making use of these new technologies have played a determining role in developing telecentres. The following vignettes illustrate two women's groups and their efforts in appropriating the new information and communication technologies to advance their work and mission.



## **FEMALE MUSSEL PICKERS IN SANTA ROSA, ESMERALDAS BRINGING BURNING ISSUES AT THE GRASSROOTS TO A GLOBAL AUDIENCE**

The Santa Rosa Association of Female Mussel Pickers in Esmeraldas is composed of 50 women whose primary work is that of harvesting mussels from the mangroves. The majority of these women have very minimal formal schooling, many do not know how to read or write. Most of the women have children who work taking care of cars in the nearby beach resort of Muisne. Like their mothers, few of the children have attended school. But in the last two years, changes for the better have occurred in their community.

In Latin America, as it is in most parts of the world, people wish each other happiness and prosperity at the start of each new year. But for the women of Esmeraldas, the beginning of 1999 forebode only more sorrows and hardships. Overnight they lost their livelihood when the corrupt mayor of Esmeraldas decided to buy the mangroves to build shrimp farms. He did this despite the fact that Ecuador's environmental laws prohibit the destruction and commercial development of the mangroves, which have been designated as bio-reserves. On average each woman collect approximately 30 mussels per hour, and are paid \$2.00 per pound by the middlemen. While a meager income, this nevertheless was enough for the women and their families to survive on.

Upon learning about the situation of the women of Santa Rosa, we, at Chasquinet got in touch with the leader of the mussle pickers' association and offered our help. In no time at all, we all soon realized that the first most important step was to get word around on what was happening in Santa Rosa. This was quite a challenge since all the media and major communication networks in the area are controlled by the mayor and the powerful owners of the shrimp farms.

Together with the women in Esmeraldas, we designed a campaign to get the attention of ecological activist organisations, such as Greenpeace, Green Alert, and other groups in Latin America and the Caribbean to exert pressure on the government to enforce the laws guaranteeing protection of the mangroves. Chasquinet used the telecentres it had installed in Esmeraldas to kick-start the strategy, and trained the women on how to carry forward the information campaign.



At first the women were incredulous; they did not know how to use computers and had no idea how computers could be used to communicate with the rest of the world. Central to the campaign strategy that we developed was using not only the Internet, but also other forms of mass media, like radio and newspapers. Media outlets like Radio Netherlands, Pulsar Information Agency, Inter Press Service and even the Association for Progressive Communications were targeted as possible media and information outlets.

The organisation that eventually came to the rescue of the mussel pickers was Greenpeace, which helped to ensure that Ecuadorian environmental laws were to be enforced to protect not only the women of Esmeraldas but also other poor communities. To date, Greenpeace continues to serve as international observers in Esmeraldas.

The government directive finally came, ordering a halt on the construction of the shrimp farms. Thus the women were able to work again in the mangroves.

We learned many lessons and insights in this campaign. One of the most striking insights was realizing that the women did not have enough time to develop their own Internet culture. Since their culture is primarily oral, they ended up writing long treatises on the Internet that did not succeed in making a strong initial impact on the gravity of the situation. We taught them to adopt a more appropriate way of communicating using the electronic media.

Many of the women in Esmeraldas have gone through very difficult life experiences. We worked hard with them to elevate their self-esteem — encouraging them throughout the campaign. At the same time, we learned to be sensitive to their needs and problems. We learned it was very important to work from a very human perspective. The mussel pickers needed to feel valued as women, to learn that they have the right to make demands.

We learned to improvise our training methods to make sure these were grounded on local realities and the particular culture of Esmeraldas; otherwise the training courses would not have worked. We had to be particularly sensitive and flexible. We had to be willing to change our strategies to respond to things that came up in the course of our work in the community.

The women continue to use the telecentre in Esmeraldas, four years after Chasquet installed it. They continue to collect mussels in their mangroves



and use the telecentre as a meeting point to share their daily problems. Interestingly, those who took advantage of the telecentre were the children who were encouraged by their mothers to learn more.

Chasquinet continues to work in Esmeraldas - providing support and encouraging the local community, particularly developing leaders among the women. We also continue developing and improving our training and organising methodologies and publishing popular education materials to better support our work with communities like Esmeraldas.

Chasquinet has not yet found a way for global women's networks in particular to support the struggle of women like those from Esmeraldas. But we only look at this as one more challenge we will resolve in the coming years.

Overall, our experience with the women in Esmeraldas taught us that the Internet can be used to carry out public campaigns about burning issues at the grassroots, to bring to a global audience the plight of struggling communities and to appeal for solidarity and support.

## **MATANGA AND PUCARA, PASTOCALLE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY CATALYSING LIFE-ALTERING CHANGES**

This very special story began in February 1998 and continues until today. In sharing it, I will not mention names because of the sensitive nature of what is currently going on in the community and because the women of Pastocalle requested me to protect their privacy.

Pastocalle, a town in the Andean highlands, is located 3,100 meters above sea level. The population is made up of indigenous people and mestizos; most are small farmers. The community decided at one point that they had to have a computer. In order to buy one, they sold many of their guinea pigs and other animals. Having finally acquired a computer, they installed it in their community building. Chasquinet helped connect Pastocalle through the telecentre, which was used by the farmers to their advantage when their potato crops were hit by a strange plague of ants. (But I am getting ahead of the story.)

The farmers, at their wits' end on how to save their crops, decided to make not one but several costly trips to Quito to try to secure help from the



Ministry of Agriculture. The government was, after all, supposed to help the people. But the visits to the Ministry office produced nothing for the farmers. Just as when the farmers were about to give up, the farmers met Chasquinet which put them in touch with other farmer organisations who could help them. And help the farmers of Pastocalle got. Plenty in fact. Eventually, through the help of other farmer organisations and by accessing information through the Internet, the farmers of Pastocalle were able to solve their problem.

But there's more.

To get the community to learn how to run and use the telecentre, Chasquinet conducted a series of training with the people. The women were most active in the entire exercise. They were mostly concerned about protecting the ecosystem of their community. And it was most natural for them to mount a campaign to declare the zone between Matanga and Pucará an ecological reserve thereby preventing the sale of the land to a Dutch company that wanted to build a hotel in the area. From strategising and running the campaign, it was the women who took the driver's seat, so to speak. Using the Internet and local Ecuadorian media, the women of Pastocalle received a lot of support for their advocacy.

The experiences of the women encouraged the local community to get interested in learning how to harness the tools of the Internet for their various goals. The young people, for example, decided they wanted to create Webpages to promote ecotourism. The women also started ways to use the Internet to promote their clothing micro-enterprise by streamlining administration and marketing. So the whole community began learning about the other worlds beyond the Andean highlands. What could be a better way of ending this story?

Except that this is not yet the end.

One day, a group of girls approached me with a bit of gossip. The boys, they said in hushed tones, were using the Internet to access pornographic sites. I caught myself just in time before I blurted out to agree with them that the boys were wrong. Instead, I asked the girls about what they felt about the situation and why they thought it was wrong for the boys to be ogling at naked women in the Internet.

What was revealed to me afterwards triggered the discovery of a very serious problem in the community — one that is not easy to confront and



address. I found out that most of the girls had been raped by an uncle or some other male relative. Concerned for the girls, I brought out the information with the community women. I soon realised that the women's sufferings ran long and deep. Many of them had also been raped by their male relatives.

I began to use the Internet to look for support and healing, because unfortunately no one here in Ecuador except the elite has access to this type of emotional help and therapy. Meanwhile, the Internet training sessions with the girls and women continued; but most often than not, these sessions became a venue for the women to open up about their experiences of domestic abuse and their husband's alcoholism. The sessions became a forum for mutual support and solidarity. An energy of caring was created and fostered and practices of solidarity began to develop. The women quickly transformed the telecentre into a space of their own where they could collectively support and heal each other.

Meanwhile, the men became uneasy and annoyed. By then, we had decided to prioritise the women's training courses, which I now think was a mistake. The men felt envious of the attention the women were getting. They became increasingly bothered by the courses's strong emphasis on harnessing self-esteem.

Until one day, a woman whom I will call Rosita, arrived at our training session with a black eye and blood on her cheek. In between sobs, Rosita's story of long-standing abuse and humiliation in the hands of her husband poured out. I felt then that it was important for Rosita to cry and share what had happened to her with the group which diminished her feeling of isolation.

A week after, Rosita returned to the telecentre, beaming. For the first time in her life, she told us, she stood up to her husband. She defended herself, and more than that, she hit back at her husband using a stick to deliver the message that she will no longer cower in fear. Rosita was triumphant and it showed.

Not soon after, disaster struck. The community's leadership changed hands and two days after Rosita's brave confrontation with her husband, the community's new directors closed down the telecentre. Cries of protests from the women, young people, and children fell on deaf ears.

I have often asked myself, what lessons have we learned from this experience? Chasquinet never earned a penny from its work with the Pastocalle. Our



relationship with the community was based on exchange — they give us sacks of corn in return for our work with them. But after working for four months with this community, we got much more than the sacks of corn in the fair exchange. We were made richer by the invaluable lessons we learned from the many brave women in the community.

In my view, the telecentre and the Internet when they were integrated into the community became tools for aiding community development. They also served as instruments to unearth deeper community problems, those that festered and were kept hidden like rape and incest. However, these tools are not in themselves the forces that finally altered the relations of power within the community. The power to transform the relations in the community comes from the women's new-found strength, their realisation that it is alright to demand changes for their betterment, and the discovery of their voices by which to assert themselves.

In the face of such changes, the men felt vulnerable. Blaming outsiders proved the easiest way for them to cope with the new situation. Chasquinet was after all the one conducting the trainings, and it was after the sessions began that the problems with the women also started. Ergo, Chasquinet must be teaching the women "bad things."

The telecentre remains closed and the community directors refuse to re-open it or give any information about their plans for it. Despite this, the women of Pastocalle travel once a month to Quito to meet in Chasquinet's office and to use the computers there.

A major change has indeed taken place in their lives. ○

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## ABOUT CHASQUINET

Chasquinet is an a private non-profit organisation in Ecuador dedicated to empowering grass-roots organisations, campesinos, minority groups and impoverished sectors in general through the promotion and use of the Internet. Chasquinet views the Internet as a tool that can be used to enable poor communities to improve their living standards, to help them voice out their opinions and demands and to create an impact on the crafting of social and economic policies that affect communities. Our work philosophy is one that prioritises gender. We approach our work with a holistic philosophy that stresses personal growth and development to be crucial elements of organisation building and growth.

Chasquinet's Community Development Programme helps build a telecentre network in the region. A central goal of this Programme is to develop a gender framework for evaluating telecentres and to collect stories that illustrate how women use the telecentres to exert a greater impact on policies and events that shape their lives.

## *About the Contributors*

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Sonia Jaffe Robbins is one of the founders of the Network of East-West Women (NEWW) and was its communications director when NEWW started its electronic networking initiative.

Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla is the coordinator of ENDA-SYNFEV and a long-time member of the APCWNSP. As coordinator of APC-Africa-Women from its inception in 1996 until the middle of 2000, Marie-Helene has guided and witnessed many breakthrough initiatives by women in the use of information and communication technology to promote genuine social development.

The Women'sNet team which contributed to the article about the pioneering electronic network in South Africa was composed of Jenny Radloff, Rebecca Holmes, Anriette Esterhuysen, and Maureen James.