

Women and Internet

Face to the South

by Lourdes Vázquez

When women took their first tentative steps towards using

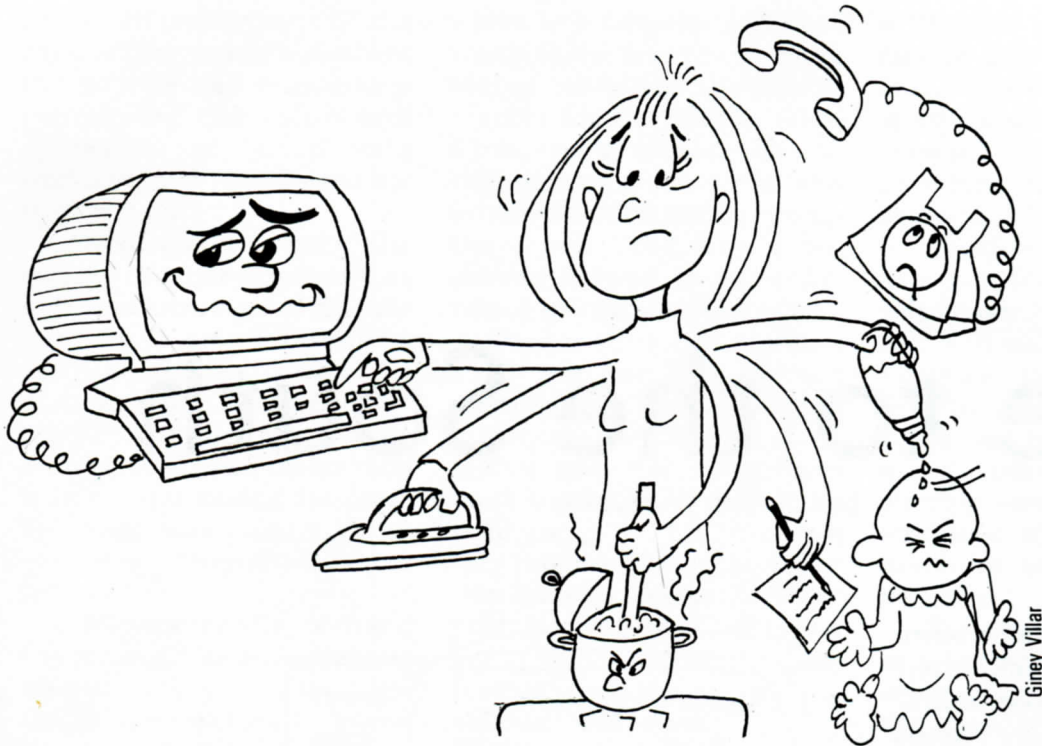
computers some 15 or 20 years ago, it was an experience similar to when we first tried to drive a car at the beginning of the century, or when we first entered the world of photography. Considering the social prejudice that we faced, the seduction of the camera lens, like the adventure of the automobile, was a challenge for women. Today, we approach a computer, we install a modem, not because they taught us how to in the shop, but because a friend told us that a modem is that electrical thing that is connected to the computer and converts "digital signals into a sound which can be sent by a common telephone line." We still don't understand, but we get the modem and install it, and another friend gives us a list of addresses. In this way, we enter the Internet, without any



type of training or real idea about this vast interactive world.

It is only later, when we begin to study this new dimension, that we discover that the experience of the woman in this virtual screen is both personal and political, and that cyberspace is once again a predominantly male area. This is why many women use neutral pseudonyms online, so as not to feel discriminated or—worse—sexually harassed. And this is

why one day, two or three of us decide to get together and create a work group, whether to study this crazy cyber thing a bit more, or to help those who are as bad or worse than ourselves. And so we begin to understand and concretize some of the tools which the Internet provides, like the OPAC venue with its vast catalogues of the most important libraries of the world, the electronic mail which makes it easy for us to send and receive messages, the electronic con-



for the rest of the world and especially in the South.

In Latin America and the Caribbean for example, Jamaica connected on the Internet in 1991, Ecuador in 1992, Bolivia in 1995, Argentina and Chile in 1990. Venezuela, as a typical petroleum country connected in the 1980s, but again as a typical petroleum country did

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ferences or newsgroups in which we can participate in discussions and debates, WAIS, Telnet, "World Wide Web" with its potential for sound and graphics.

We also discover that the electronic conferences, which are organized around distinct themes, allow us to dialogue and debate with other colleagues without taking academic backgrounds or age into consideration. One definition of these work groups can be found in an IDRC essay on information: "Carefully designed computer conferences offer a unique opportunity for conducting investigations at an international level. Participants can at their leisure take as much time as they want to articulate their points and carry out any homework they deem appropriate."

However, we know from experience that this technology is not equally available and we can talk for hours about the feminization of poverty, but it boils down to the fact that women's salaries are much lower than men's and that women receive much less training or education in general, and in the area of science and technology in particular. Thus it is less easy for women to own or have access to computers, modems, and computer programmes or to subscribe to a private electronic mail service. The cost of telecommunications and the lack of equipment like telephone lines and computers are critical in countries in the South. The Internet has had a strong support of the American government and has been in the USA for a couple of years. But this is not the case

not start using it till the '90s. We know that electronic mail is being used a lot by academic and government institutions and corporations in Brazil and Mexico. We also know that generally this technology is in the hands of male supervisors and technicians who control its use, because they have better education or because they are on the management level.

How much money is the state investing in this technology? Venezuela, Colombia and Chile, for example, allocate two million dollars in order to improve their access to Internet. What does this mean? Where does this money go exactly? How many members from the civil society will actually benefit from this investment? How many women?

We could add to this list other factors that usually are not taken into consideration and which can affect women's

use of the technology. Outside cyberspace and in the reality of our lives, women are still burdened and tied down by their usual daily concerns and decisions. Women researchers from the Bay Area in the USA note that "additional deterrents to on-line participation may be attributed to women's roles in society. While more women are now in the work place, they often are still the primary caretakers for their children. In the majority of households, women bear the brunt of household chores. Women may find they have less free time to learn to navigate on-line systems." Statistics in the sphere of computer science, verifies what we already know: that only a small number of women are specializing in this field. Clearly, more men than women have entry into cyberspace.

The women who do enter cyberspace use it differently than men. Studies show that women navigate the Internet in a distinct way. Their dialogue is more inclusive, less formal and categorical, and is much less hierarchical. Look at this message from the Association of Independent Women's Initiatives in Russia: "Dear Sister! Today we have our e-mail training in Tver. It is Saturday. The weather is fine. The sun is shining. But we crowd around our computer and can't stop our work..." Josephine Beoku-Betts of the Secretariat of Once and Future Action Network (OFAN) said in

an OFAN electronic conference that as women, we can be intimate. Our language is like that of our mother when she wakes us up. "Good morning. How are you today. I hope you all had a pleasant and restful holiday season." Cyberspace is full of these women and their cauldrons of spells.

What do some of these women do? The women of MAGIN from Cuba is unique if only for the fact that it made the first attempt to connect women in Cuba with those outside. Its objectives include maximizing the exchange of

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information, developing techniques, and coordinating research and projects. By doing so, it facilitates a democratic space in which to talk and make decisions. There is also ModemMuher. This is a project of Mexican women that arose out of the need to set up a permanent communication between the feminist movement and women at the national and international level via electronic mail. There is also the Alai mujeres, a group that works in the area of communication, training and policy making, facilitating a space where

women's movements can coordinate and exchange information on media and communication projects and policies.

But what characterizes these technically skilled women, most of whom dedicate a considerable amount of time to offering training and workshops, creating work groups and conferences or posting information? What kind are these women who offer voluntary services to support this interactive dialogue? The common characteristic is age. They are

young activists in the post-modern era, self-taught in computers, programming and data bases. Personally, this is marvellous. It shows that young women have always been there with the feminist movement. They capture the attention of people who, after having spent months talking with them by electronic mail, meet them in person and are fascinated by their youth. "So young?" they ask, not understanding that it is precisely because of their youth that these women took the risks to enter the world of science and technology. It is these young women who search daily for the appropriate technology for their organisations, who give technical assistance, who dialogue with different tele-communications companies, who offer training in the use of the Internet and its different components, and who also keep up to date with the innovations in this area such as the World

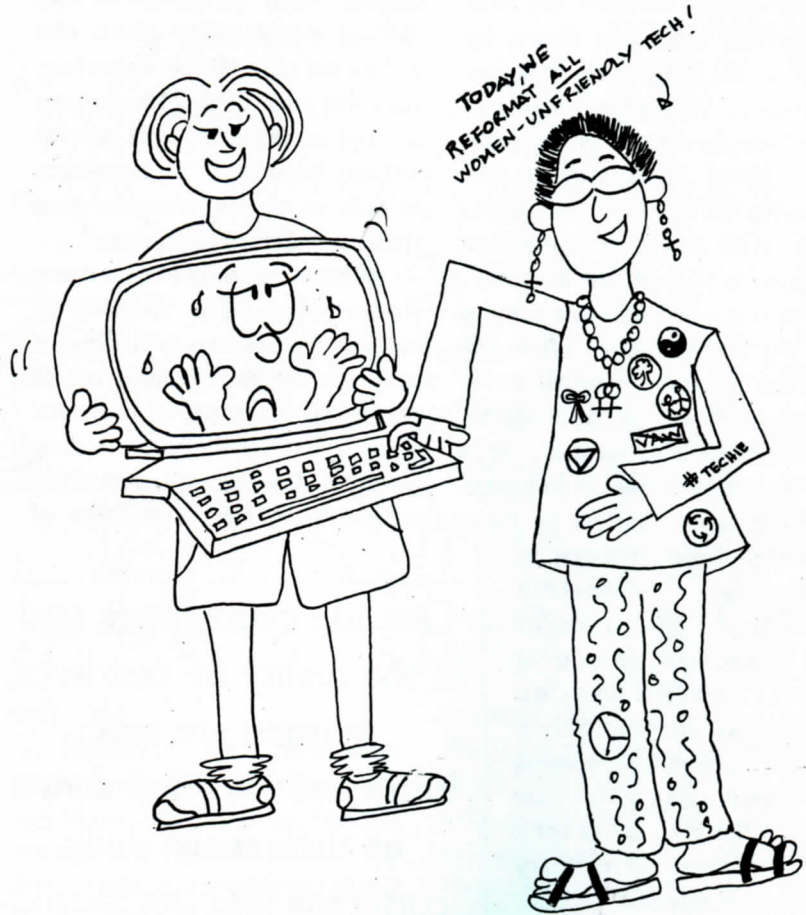
Wide Web and its attributes.

Yet, it is important to point out that these same young women who are professionals in this area may, in trying to advance professionally in the predominantly male arena of information, later find that doors are closed to them at conferences, workshops or marketing fairs and even at work.

Activist women distribute urgent appeals and organise women around a theme, ask for advice about politics and how to develop projects or problem-solving strategies, insert their database, write in the Internet a policy paper and debate with all sorts of people. They organise regional and international meetings, coordinate projects in remote areas and in their own homes and influence debates on gender. They are creating their own space.

Not only is cyberspace a space for academe-based women exchanging research, bibliographies and questionnaires. Today, both women academicians and women activists answer questions, publicise their work, discuss gender in all its complexity. More importantly, they continue to get to know each other through getting to know each other through fibre optics.

But there is still a lot left to do. Despite the 20 years that have passed since the first world meeting of women in Mexico, there are still millions who do not have access to these new technology. In fact, many still cannot



contact their immediate neighbours by mail or even by telephone. This is the case for millions of rural and working women.

Yet, in pushing for the use of cyberspace, we must also always remember that the South has always been inundated with information from the North and the Internet is not an exception. The Internet is filled with information that sometimes are not relevant to the experiences of women in the South. Information too is almost always in English.

This is why this new information revolution should be discussed much more by women of the South within the

South, a discussion between equals, in order for civil society and particularly for the women's movement to be able to take hold of the technology.

De cara al Sur. Face to the South. Lourdes Vázquez works with the International Women's Tribune Center. This article was culled from the paper she presented at the Women and Development Conference of the National Women's Studies Association, USA in June 1996.

De Cara al Sur also refers to the Mexican feminist journal FEM's new devoted page in the Internet.