Latin American Women Take on the Internet

by Sally Burch

The unprecedented potential the human race has developed for universal access and exchange of information and knowledge, if appropriately channeled, could contribute to more equitable development as well as to furthering mutual understanding between nations, cultures, religions. This in turn could assist in building consensus on planetary goals and promoting world peace.

Nonetheless, predominantly, the world continues to move in the opposite direction. Poverty and social inequalities are on the increase; the information and technology gap is widening; armed conflict is rife; cultural and racial discrimination continues to blight human coexistence; and incommunication prevails.

Information technology obviously will not solve the world's problems. But wisely deployed and developed, it has proven to be a powerful tool for advancing social causes. One of the social groups that has been most dynamic in using this technology innovatively for social progress is the women's movement; and in many aspects, the South has exerted leadership in this process.

The impact of globalisation has prompted organisations linked to development issues to seek alliances across the globe so as to have a voice in international fora and decision-making spaces. This leads to the creation of networks around specific issues. In the case of women's organisations, networking has been one of their preferred forms of organisations since the 1960s, so they have readily adapted to this new need. However, at an international scale, and especially in the South, such initiatives have often been hampered by the lack or high cost of accessible and efficient means of communication. So for many such organisations, electronic networks rapidly became a vital means of communication and linking up.

In Latin America, one organisation that has been working in the field of social networking since the late 1980s is the Agencia Latinoamericana de Informacion (ALAI), based in Ecuador. ALAI is committed to building a more dramatic communication fabric, as a necessary prerequisite for democracy and for a more inclusive process of development. This led ALAI to promote the use of electronic networking as a central element of its training program in communication for social networks in the region, which, among others, are directed to rural, indigenous and women's organisations.

The Women's Program developed by ALAI has played a leading role in promoting women's access to new technologies as a means of empowerment. Its actions include formulation of proposals, advocacy, training and network building, focusing on orienting women's organisations towards a more strategic use of these tools.

One of the issues ALAI emphasises is that electronic networks—and this differentiates them from other carriers—allow for the formation of communication spaces (cyberspace). And as these virtual spaces become occupied, they give rise to disputes for hegemony. In this respect, it is important for women to be presented from the outset, so they will not be faced with a new form of marginalisation. Moreover, to compete in this field

> INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, WHEN WISELY DEPLOYED AND DEVELOPED, HAS PROVEN TO BE A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ADVANCING SOCIAL CAUSES.

from a position of strength requires thinking in terms of convergence, since isolated initiatives are almost certainly doomed to failure.

Demystifying technology

In Latin America, it was the process leading up to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) that meant an important impulse to women's electronic networking. This was linked to the worldwide initiative led by the Women's Networking Support Program of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC).

The Program approached the issue from its communication potential, rather than from the technology itself. It contributed to demystifying technology for many women's organisations, by promoting a vision that is not an end in itself, but can be harnessed to the particular needs of an organisation or movement. And within this vision, it has developed gender-sensitive training methods, designed to overcome the specific barriers that often inhibit women from using these tools, and which have meant that they are still in a minority as users of the Net. Such barriers include an education less oriented to technology, of the male image often associated with it.

Given limited resources and time, the Program opted to work particularly with groups whose work has a multiplying effect, and it prioritised organisational aspects: how women can organise to channel information to and from groups that are not on-line, using a variety of communication tools, of which electronic networks came to constitute the central axis. Special attention was therefore given to women's information providers and media,

as well as assisting existing women's regional networks in linking up more effectively.

The result of this work was most visible during the Beijing Conference and NGO Forum, when information, organised by language and geographic interest, brought the central issues of these events over the Internet to a concerned public, anxious for information. Thanks to the previously organised links, in many countries around the world, in-depth information on the content of the panels, workshops and debates—contrasting sharply with much of the mainstream media coverage—could reach local networks through the Internet, which in turn redisseminated it through their own channels (fax, radio programs, publications, press releases, meetings, etc.) Much of this work took place through regular E-mail, which has generally been more accessible in the South than full Internet.

Following up to this experience, many other women's organisations in Latin America are now linked to the Net, and developing their own exchange networks or web pages. This means they rapidly need to adjust to new challenges, such as how to deal with the information overload, and interlinking scattered women's information sources. But also, a number of other social groups have been inspired by the women's experience and are now seeking to develop their own networking spaces.

Source: *GreenNet Limited*, September 1997