

Celebrating 25 Years of Networking

by Anne S. Walker



The Tribune/IWTC

In the past 25 years, international, regional and national women's media networks have worked together to build what has become a truly global women's movement. With a strong background of leadership and linkages—often built around the early work of more traditional international membership organisations such as the World YWCA and Associated Country Women of the World—women have set up and expanded networks of communication and information that stretch into the farthest reaches of the world.

In the past, the informal, but often very effective ways in which women around the world have maintained contact with each other have been seen as poor alternatives to the use of the much larger and so-called more "effective" official channels of communication, e.g. the mass media, government machineries, multi-national corporations and international

agencies. However, this is an assumption that could do with more critical analysis. Official channels are dependent on political fortunes, budget priorities, the market place, and the whims of whoever is in power at the time.

In contrast, women's alternative networks usually share an ideology and a set of values that have provided the "glue" to these networks, and have sustained and allowed them to grow in a variety of shapes and forms that constantly change, break into new groups, dissolve and reform in an organic flow of movement completely unfamiliar in the world of bureaucracies, changing governments and commercial mainstream media.

The world of women is a world of networks in which there are many leaders but no one person or group who does everything. Each network provides a channel for the collection, dissemination and generation of information, without

any participant or group being dependent on one source only.

In 1999, the three Isis groups celebrate 25 years of international networking on behalf of the empowerment of women. In 2001, the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) will also celebrate 25 years as an international network and communications support service for women worldwide. These years of strategising, hard work and outreach have borne much fruit, and it is time for us all to celebrate this!

There is no doubt that the four United Nations World Conferences on Women, and in particular the four NGO Forums held parallel to them in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995), have given great encouragement to women worldwide, especially in efforts to have governments and those in power recognise the community activism and work which women have

always undertaken. Women from every world region are now collaborating at a much closer level than ever before, and with added resources and support, are able to undertake activities in their own communities that previously would have been unthinkable.

The major product to come out of the most recent UN World Conference on Women—the Beijing Platform for Action—is an important tool for the empowerment of women, and many women have become active in monitoring the actions of governments and the UN itself in its implementation. The advent of new information technologies such as electronic networking via computers, fax broadcasting, and other forms of telecommunications, has introduced a new dimension into all of this, with more women now able to follow what is happening at the United Nations and other international and regional organisations and agencies.

But it is important that all these new tools and techniques for women's empowerment—the UN World Conferences, the plans/platforms for action, the electronic networking, etc.—are seen as expansions of what has already been put in place by women worldwide, and not as substitutions. Many networks have been solidly established over the years by the research and creativity that has gone into countless feminist/women's conferences, workshops, meetings, and training courses worldwide, and by the ongoing production of print materials around women and development issues that are sent out through the mail.

One example of a global women's network that was

started at the beginning of the Decade for Women (1976-1985) is the IWTC network, which has grown from an initial constituency of approximately 6,000 to more than 26,000 in every world region. The publications of IWTC are in English, French and Spanish, and are produced in a highly visual, easy-to-read format that is well known around the world. As the years have gone by, IWTC has taken on added roles as a resource centre, a

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service that seeks out women and development publications and markets them to women worldwide, a provider of technical assistance and training, and an outlet for electronic conferencing and networking.

Above all, IWTC has grown with the global women's movement, with its basic philosophy and goals remaining what they were at the beginning almost 25 years ago. IWTC still aims to open access to information and knowledge for women in every corner of the world so that we all can participate more fully in decision-making around

policies and plans that affect the future of our communities.

At the core of these efforts are the requests that come to IWTC from women in every world region. The need is for information on resources, contacts, and examples of actions and experiences from other women also working around issues of social change and development. In an effort to find ways of responding more adequately to these requests for help, IWTC has supported the building of coalitions and networks among women and women's groups at local, national, regional and international level. More recently, we have supported women writers and publishers in the Global South, and made their books on women and development more readily available through Women, Ink. The year 2000 will see countless women's networks functioning that were not there in 1975.

Much of this has been made more possible with the advent of new information technologies, particularly electronic conferencing, E-mail networking, and fax broadcasting. For instance, when the China Organizing Committee suddenly announced in March 1995 that the NGO Forum on Women would be moved from its downtown Beijing site to a site 40 miles away in Huairou, IWTC sent an urgent alert to WOMENET, a fax network of 28 women's media networks around the world that was set up after a women's media workshop in Barbados in 1991. Each women's media network faxed the message out to its own network in each world region, and before long, tens of thousands of signatures were being sent in protest to the

United Nations and the China Organizing Committee in Beijing. Unfortunately, it didn't change the minds of the Chinese hosts, though it encouraged them to increase their efforts to provide better accommodations and facilities at Huairou. It did however illustrate how rapidly and efficiently women could reach out and support each other in a time of crisis, a very empowering moment for women worldwide.

From this beginning grew the Global Faxnet, a fax network of more than 500 "multiplier" groups in 88 countries who took the weekly one-page bulletin and faxed it to all their networks. From Global Faxnet came a sister network known as GlobalNet, initially sent to more than 500 E-mail "multiplier" addresses and many of the Beijing-related electronic conferences and home pages on the World Wide Web. Both of these information networks are now known collectively as the IWTC Women's GlobalNet, and at last count, there were almost 2,000 "multiplier" groups receiving the bulletin on either the English-language or Spanish-language e-mail networks, or the fax network.

From statements made by some of these "multiplier" groups in a recent external evaluation of the activities of IWTC, it has been estimated that tens of thousands of individuals and groups now regularly receive the IWTC Women's GlobalNet bulletin on the activities and initiatives of women worldwide.

Future information and communication strategies need to be multifaceted and all-inclusive. Struggling channels

need to be strengthened and successful channels need to be evaluated and expanded to reach others. The world of print materials is in many ways falling behind in this new age of modern technologies and tools. We can get breaking news around the world in seconds....but in-depth, substantive materials that support the advocacy and education efforts of women are becoming more and more difficult to produce and disseminate widely.

This is where the work of groups such as IWTC and its sister information networks Isis International-Manila, Isis Internacional-Santiago, and Isis-WICCE/Kampala have become increasingly important. For 25 years, working in collaboration with regional and national information and media networks—such as FemPress, International Feminist Radio (FIRE) and Agencia Latinoamericana de Informacion (ALAI) in Latin America, ENDA-Synfev, FemNet, WomensNet and TAMWA in Africa, Women's Features Service, DepthNews, Women and Media Network for Asia and the Pacific, Asia Pacific Media Task Force and others in Asia, CAFRA and Women's Media Watch in the Caribbean—these international women's networks have reached tens of thousands of community activists in every world region with in-depth, substantive print materials that support and empower the work of women. Supplemented with breaking news disseminated via electronic networks to core groups that have access to the Internet, print materials

have played an important role that is often not sufficiently recognised.

Future strategies need to include these time-honoured print methods of outreach and support. Additionally, a carefully thought out communication outreach strategy would include information that is E-mailed and/or faxed to groups worldwide to "multiplier" groups who can take the information, translate the appropriate pieces for their region or country, use it on the radio, in their own newsletters and journals, and/or fax and E-mail it to their own networks. We must continue to use alternative networking to our advantage, and strengthen and sustain the most viable structures that we women have built .

Finally, in addition to the above activities, an effective women's communication strategy should now include websites on the World Wide Web, electronic conferences/dialogues at international, regional and national levels, training workshops in the tech-



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nical aspects of web construction and maintenance and the facilitating of online dialogues for activists in the regions, participation in gender caucuses at international conferences on development issues, and the location and marketing of publications about, by and for women.

A global communications strategy incorporating many of the features of the strategy

discussed above emerged from discussions between women's information and media networks participating in the first Preparatory Committee (PrepCom I-March 1999) for the Beijing Plus Five Special Session in 2000. These groups formed what is now known as the WomenAction Coalition and, in close collaboration with WomenWatch—the UN website consortium for and about UN gender events and activities—have been working solidly since then to implement a communications strategy that will make it possible for women community activists in every world region to participate more fully in the Beijing Plus Five review and appraisal process.

A major focus of the WomenAction strategy is the training of women from every world region, so that they can undertake the construction and maintenance of regional websites that will contain information on: country and regional NGO alternative reports; NGO initiatives and information around the Beijing Plus Five process; NGO access and participation in UN meetings in general and the Special Session on Beijing Plus Five specifically; the monitoring and reviewing of specific actions being taken to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

In conjunction with the setting up of regional websites, a global website is under construction. Entitled WomenAction 2000, the site will be “mirrored” in each region, making available regionally and globally the latest information on planning and preparations for the Beijing Plus Five Special Session. The global web-site is registered as: <www.womenaction.org/

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2000>. Regional websites are already in operation in Asia, Africa and North America, with sites soon to be launched in Europe (East and West) and Latin America. All those interested in learning more about these initiatives are invited to send a message to: <wimnet@gn.apc.org>.

The WomenAction Coalition (still a “work in progress”) currently includes the following women's information and media groups:

- ◆ International Women's Tribune Centre, USA
- ◆ IIAV/Knowledge Sharing Project, The Netherlands
- ◆ Isis International-Manila, Philippines
- ◆ Isis Internacional, Santiago, Chile
- ◆ Isis-WICCE, Kampala, Uganda
- ◆ Women's Features Service, India and USA
- ◆ Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action
- ◆ US Women Connect, Washington, DC, USA
- ◆ APC/Women's Network Support Program (N. America, Europe, Africa, L. America,

Asia) including ENDA/Synfev, Dakar, Senegal; FemNet, Nairobi, Kenya; WomensNet, South Africa; ALAI, Quito, Ecuador; also (as collaborating partners) WomenWatch, including UNIFEM, UN/DAW, INSTRAW and UNDP/GIDP.

The battle for the minds and hearts of people everywhere is an on-going one, with more money than any of us could ever once imagine dedicated to taking control of mass media networks, including radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines, cable, satellite, Internet, and telecommunications in general.

For women to be able to wind their way through this maze of technology and power in order to reach out to the community activists who are fighting for the empowerment of women and for gender justice at all levels, we need to be determined and imaginative with our strategies and outreach. A clear path has been forged by the work of activist women's groups and media networks over the past 25 years. We must continue to build on this framework, and work towards a day when every woman in every country of the world has access to the information and knowledge she needs, and is empowered to participate at every level of governance in her country, region and the world. ♪

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