

# The Internet Empowers Women With Disabilities

By Inge Komardjaja

In a developing country such as Indonesia, where the social, economic, and political situations are unstable and where the major problem is poverty, people with disabilities and their needs are not a priority.

Traditional societies are usually patriarchal societies, where the status of women is lower than that of men. Women's roles as nurturer of the family and housekeeper prevail over the improvement of their own quality of life.

From the general image of the traditional roles of women, we can imagine the plight of women with disabilities in a patriarchal society. Opportunities for self-development through education and employment are taken away and given to the non-disabled. Even among the people with disabilities, the women are considered inferior compared with the men. The attitude of the family and society at large engenders such women to be dependent on others and to live at the mercy of their family and the state.

Discrimination against women with disabilities in developing countries has been a great concern of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) since 1995. Evidence that women with disabilities are indeed disadvantaged prompted UNESCAP to appeal to governments to heed the lives of these women and try to empower them.

One of the ways identified to help women

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with disabilities is through the information and communication technology of the Internet. In the midst of the current economic crisis it can be costly to construct environments that are free of physical barriers and ensure the independent personal mobility of women with disabilities in public spaces. The Internet technology, however, could allow them to work in a safe and convenient environment.

Users of modern technology and appliances are mainly from the middle and upper class. They are equipped with various resources and thus, tend to make more significant progress than those of the underclass. Even if the Internet is accessible to all people, regardless of gender, age, socio-economic class, and physical ability

(Neumann and Uhlenkueken 2001), this paper focuses on women with disabilities from the middle class who are likely to be computer-literate. Having received higher education and professional training, they are likely to be independent in thinking and personal mobility, but in many instances the social and physical barriers obstruct their further advancement.

Against this backdrop and being a woman with disability myself, I would like to share how the Internet has been a useful infrastructure to break down the barriers of social isolation and physical impediments and how it has enhanced my life considerably.

### How the Internet can help

When people socialise, physical appearance, body language, voice, and attitude form the first impression which may last as a like or dislike of the other person. The Internet has a non-discriminating impact on people, because of its potential for personal communication without the parties having to meet face to face. Our physical disabilities and personal shortcomings are not exposed to the interlocutors. This gives us the liberty to express ourselves without fear of being rejected. This, however, does not mean that disabilities and shortcomings have to be covered up.

The Internet enhances interaction among people and social groups from all sections of life. Basically, it offers information of any kind whatsoever, and if used in a targeted way, the Internet can ameliorate information and communication (*ibid.*). Intensive communication can be done via E-mail, in spite of the geographical distance between people (*ibid.*). Each individual is able to give her/his contribution to the mailing lists. As the saying goes, "Information is power." The Internet empowers individuals by giving them access to more information and op-

portunities to develop meaningful contacts. Women with disabilities may experience a positive change in their outlook on life.

### My personal experience

Life without a purpose is meaningless. The hope of achieving something motivates us to work hard and overcome barriers to our goals. Thanks to the Internet my aspiration to become a writer is getting clearer. My personal experience has taught me that success does not happen overnight and that making contact is a process. We should realise that developing effective networking among people with similar interest in a particular field is a long haul.

Never have I regretted being on the Internet. When I am in town, not one day goes by without me checking the E-mails and sometimes browsing through information in my field. I will show what prompted me to subscribe to the Internet service provider and in what ways the Internet is a resourceful tool.

In the beginning of 1996, when only a few people were familiar with and interested in the Internet, I questioned in what ways the Internet could be beneficial. I knew it had its merits, but how to enter it and use the information avail-



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able remained a puzzle. My modest monthly salary as a government official was an important consideration. Finally I decided to take the plunge, and from my meagre savings I asked someone to upgrade the computer's software and hardware, and bought a modem. After the computer had been connected to an Internet service provider, I began browsing aimlessly. This went on for about one year, mainly because I did not know what to search. Nonetheless, I was pleased that the Internet helped me to stay in touch with local and overseas friends and acquaintances.



In 1997 a Japanese colleague, who worked in our office, broached the idea of studying barrier-free environments for disabled and older people. I was surprised that disability was even an area of study, because I had always thought that being disabled was a matter of fate (though I never considered my disability to be the main characteristic of my personality).

This novel idea became the point of departure of my journey to become a writer with a focus on disability issues.

Due to the country's poverty, Indonesia today does not concern itself much with the needs of disabled people. Thus, little informa-

tion on this subject is available. I was able to use the Internet effectively to link up with people overseas who share my interest and whose knowledge about disability is more advanced than mine.

### The electronic community

In spite of holding a PhD degree and having worked for over 20 years with the same government organisation, my working career has not changed at all; my position remains the same as when I began working. Instead of letting disenchantment and frustration creep in, I turn my mind to the Internet, which unexpectedly absorbs much of my time. I discover a wealth of information that can be instantly accessed at any time.

In the real world, seeking information is time-consuming and what we need may not be available. To be a writer means to collect much information and that means having to read a lot. Having decided firmly on the field that I wanted to study, I subscribed to several electronic associations and joined mailing lists relating to disability issues.

I thought: "If my colleagues don't appreciate my potentials, the international community does." Gradually I was able to establish friendships with people from around the world through E-mail. As an electronic community, we exchange information and experience without having to meet up. However, we must be very careful in our communications, because what has been written will be read and remembered. Written words have the power to influence the reader's mind positively as well as negatively. It is not easy to withdraw negative written words that have been sent or uploaded.

### Working at home

Hardly do we see disabled women on the road, but if there are any they have to cope with

all sorts of barriers. It's hard for me to go out by myself and use public transport, because I am not able to get on the rear part of the van. I need to wait until a seat in the front part is vacant. Added to this are the high, uneven, and cracked sidewalks where eating stalls occupy almost the whole width. I have to stand and wait at the edge of the road instead of on the sidewalk.

Having access to the Internet at home is a great solution that saves me from these troubles. My workplace has access to the Internet, but there is a limited number of terminals. It is therefore more effective and efficient to work at home rather than waste time on the road waiting for a ride and being stuck in a traffic jam. I can write reports at home, send the file as attachment to the E-mail to my office, and print it out the next day.

### **Networking with people in the same field**

Printed words that have quality content are hard to find or are not available in bookstores and libraries where I am. Foreign textbooks and journals are expensive. Writing about particular topics is difficult for me because I lack access to the latest information about my field.

Thanks to supportive E-mail friends my writing ability is progressing. They have encouraged me to write for international journals or one chapter of a book. Some of them even sent me generously their pieces of writing, so I can have ideas in what ways disability issues have developed. This was not my intention when I started networking through the Internet, but I'm just happy it turned out to be this useful to me.

### **It can empower us**

Not all women with disabilities of the middle class have jobs. Many are unemployed and have small incomes and hence they cannot afford to subscribe to the Internet. Those who can invest their savings in a personal computer

and the Internet ought to do so. To set aside capital for this infrastructure seems risky, but in the long run the Internet is the most accessible and affordable means to get information and to constitute international networking. Alternatively, low-priced public terminals should be provided, so that unemployed women with disabilities can empower themselves too (*ibid.*).

The Internet is also a means to improve intellectual skills of reading, writing, and developing original ideas. For us who come from a non-English speaking background, the Internet helps to improve our command of English, because it is the language used in electronic international networking.

The Internet, however, can never replace face-to-face contact among people (*ibid.*). As social and emotional beings, we still need to meet people with whom we can express and receive positive and negative emotions of joy, friendliness, happiness, sympathy, tolerance, sadness, anger, unhappiness, hatred, and intolerance.

The Internet is not the only means of enriching our lives, but it certainly provides an empowering result. ♪

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Reference: Peter Neumann and Christoph Uhlenkueken (2001). "Assistive Technology and the Barrier-free city: A Case Study from Germany," *Urban Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp 367-376.