

# Women Connect!

## Case study of an alternative communication model

by Doe Mayer and Barbara Pillsbury

**F**or women's organisations engaged in outreach—whether to community members or to politicians, legislators and the media, communication skills are crucial. Today the communication strategies of women's non-government organisations (NGOs) span a broad range—from posters, folk drama, and slogan-bearing t-shirts to the Internet and Websites. However, many, if not most, women's organisations, in both developed and developing countries, know they still have much to learn about communication—be it traditional media, mass media or modern information technology.

*Women Connect!* was a five-year initiative to help women's NGOs be more strategic and participatory in their use of communication and thereby increase their overall effectiveness. Our operating hypothesis and underlying conviction was that only by strengthening a broad range of communications capacities would an organisation be able to maximise its impact. We therefore designed an approach combining two components: (1) information communication technology (ICT) and (2) strategic use of traditional and mass media (such as posters, brochures, drama and radio), especially for what communications professionals refer to as "media campaigns." *Women Connect!* presents a unique model in combining these two components in a single project that provides training, technical collaboration and small grants.

*Women Connect!*, including its pilot project, was carried out

collaboratively between 1997 and 2002 by two organisations, the Pacific Institute for Women's Health and the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California, both based in Los Angeles. The goals of *Women Connect!* were: (1) to contribute to women's empowerment through collaboration, communications capacity-building and information-sharing with women's organisations; and (2) to help women strengthen their organisations and their ability to achieve their own objectives, especially in the areas of women's health and well-being, including reproductive and sexual health and rights.<sup>1</sup> *Women Connect!* was carried out with 30 women's NGOs in Africa (Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda<sup>2</sup>), but the lessons learned apply to communications work with women's groups throughout the world. Our vision for *Women Connect!* was to help women's organisations use the power of information and

communication tools to change women's lives.

### Not Just ICT but Also Media

In recent years ICT has become indispensable for organisations and individuals wanting to communicate beyond their immediate locale. The women's movement has also emphasised the importance of women's having access to these technologies. Begins a recent analysis:

Information technology (IT) has become a potent force in transforming social, economic, and political life globally... More and more concern is being shown about the impact on those left on the other side of the digital divide—the division between the information 'haves' and 'have nots.' Most women within developing countries are in the deepest part of the divide—further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share. If access to and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women in developing countries understand the significance of these technologies and use them... Many people dismiss the concern for gender and IT in developing countries on

the basis that development should deal with basic needs first. However, it is not a choice between one and the other. IT can be an important tool in meeting women's basic needs and can provide the access to resources to lead women out of poverty. (Hafkin and Taggart, 2001, p.1).

However, also important in the work of women's NGOs is the use of diverse forms of media (posters, brochures, drama, radio and so on) to communicate messages to grassroots communities. Around the world, including in "developed" countries, the skills of women's NGOs in using these forms of media are often limited. In the past years, international donor agencies have supported a tremendous amount of skills building in the area of media campaigns, but mainly with governments and their health and education ministries (e.g., for family planning and child survival, immunisation, and Oral Rehydration Therapy). The approaches and lessons learned were not previously shared with women's NGOs. We considered this a major oversight that needed remedying. In *Women Connect!*, we did not want to oversell ICT so that participating groups forgot the importance of other communication media. Rather, we also wanted to strengthen their capacities in using multiple forms of media and linking them more effectively.

During the initial needs assessment, women's groups repeatedly expressed frustration over their relation-

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ships with journalists and how their organisations are portrayed in mass media. They wanted to be able to deal with journalists more effectively. In response, we added this to our programme.

#### **Project Structure and Content**

*Women Connect!* was designed with the following complementary activities: needs assessment, training workshops, technical collaboration, small grants, and sharing of women's health information

#### ***Project Participation and North-South Issues***

We knew from previous work that many women's organisations wanted to improve their communications capacity. Yet, as an organisation based in the North, we wanted to avoid super-imposing Northern donor agendas. To identify organisations interested in participating in *Women*

*Connect!*, we visited the women's NGO communities in several African countries. In each of the three countries selected, we administered a needs assessment to interested groups, asking them to discuss their mission and organisational priorities. Many groups expressed interest in improving communications, with regard to both ICT and media campaigns, and the use of traditional and mass media. They wanted to reach their target audiences better and felt they were not using media effectively. Additionally, many were not on E-mail and wanted to learn to use it, especially for networking and fund-raising.

#### ***Information Communication Technology***<sup>3</sup>

The ICT component of *Women Connect!* introduced new information technologies, especially E-mail and the Internet, to help women's organisations link with the world outside. Unlike many other programmes that focus only on ICT (providing computers plus, at most, basic training in running them), our strategy went beyond merely "wiring" the organisations. A major premise was that the effective use of ICT requires much more than hardware, software, electricity and a phone line. Because technology is a dramatic innovation for many women's NGOs, we believed it was critical to address how organisations incorporate this technology into their structures. We wanted groups to understand the ways in which technology can change power relationships and affect organisational hierarchy. The project also took into ac-





This poster was developed by the YWCA in Zimbabwe as part of a media campaign "Week Without Violence."

count barriers to appropriate use. For example, some NGO directors are intimidated by the technology and stand in the way of the adoption of these innovations, as a result excluding younger staff members with the interest or skill in these technologies. To succeed at ICT, organisations must allocate time, resources and support,

and even change how people work. Some women's groups had one or two persons carrying out the technology-related activities of the organisation. We helped to identify appropriate staff and worked to develop their skills.

*Communication Campaigns and Strategic Use of Media*

The second project component introduced the principles and components of communication campaigns, an important approach which many smaller NGOs are not familiar with or adept in.

A classic definition is that communication campaigns are "purposeful attempts to inform, persuade or motivate behaviour changes in a relatively well-defined and large audience, generally for non-commercial benefits and/or society at large, typically within a given time period, by means of organised communication activities involving mass media and often complemented by inter-personal support. (Rice and Atkins 1989, p.7).

The media component emphasised two ideas. Too often, when organisations develop messages, they speak to themselves rather than to the audiences they are trying to reach, or they talk down to audiences. For instance, a poster in Africa showed a man beating a woman. The message, in English, said, "Wife-beating is illegal." It had a scolding tone that talked down to people.



Although the poster may have made the women's group feel better, its effect on men's behaviour, if any, is doubtful. *Women Connect!* emphasised the need for community-based research, especially a needs assessment and pre-testing of messages so that campaign designs would be more participatory and more tailored to the target group's needs. After the training, Sheila Kamawara of the Uganda Women's Network said that her group had been preaching to the choir and "had pointed fingers and not understood people's problems and realities. There is... a strong and urgent need to look at issues from the eyes of the people we are trying to reach."

The second important idea was the use of multiple media designed and combined in a more strategic way. We encouraged groups to use brochures, calendars, and theatre and radio messages because research tells us that campaigns work better when more than one medium is involved. Since the cost of multiple media and more strategic campaigns is greater, we suggested that groups could network and divide tasks and financial responsibilities. We felt this would also help them work together to have more impact in their communities.

### ***Training, Technical Collaboration and Small Grants***

*Media Strategy and Information Workshops.* In Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda, we identified a leading local NGO to co-host a Media Strategy and Information Technology training

workshop. We identified professionals in each country to participate in the workshop as trainers and co-facilitators to be available for technical collaboration after the workshops.

***Small Grants.*** "If you don't use it, you lose it." We knew that training alone was not enough to make something happen. Often in the development field, training workshops are conducted with the assumption that participants will go back to their organisations and implement the new ideas and skills learned from a workshop. Previous experience had taught us that this was not enough. We saw making small grants (ranging from US\$3,000 to \$5,000) available as putting steam in the engine. Following the workshops, we worked with each of the participating NGOs to help them conceptualise a small-grants proposal. The Pacific Institute awarded small grants to 26 organisations in the three countries to conduct a one-year project based on their own design and related to some aspect of communications tackled during the training. *Women Connect!* provided technical assistance and collaboration during the year. In a final evaluation, the participating organisations emphasised the importance of the small grants in allowing them to implement in a substantive way the new learning introduced in the workshops.

### **Three Organisations and Their Projects**

Three examples illustrate the diverse approaches and activities taken

by the 26 organisations that carried out projects with the *Women Connect!* small grants.

*Forum for African Women Educationalists Uganda (FAWEU)* downloaded information from the Internet and repackaged it in formats appropriate for secondary school girls. Girls in 17 participating schools advised FAWEU on what kind of study materials they felt they needed. FAWEU downloaded various subjects, edited, photocopied and bound them, and sent them out to rural schools. Subjects distributed included profiles of female scientists, material on domestic abuse and how it can affect girls, tips for young poets and writers, and literary analysis of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

*Uganda Private Midwives Association* downloaded health information from the Internet, then translated and used this in radio programmes to reach rural audiences. Information targeted women and included topics such as maternal mortality, marketing professional midwife services, and health issues such as malaria and breastfeeding. The organisation translated radio programmes into three local languages and promoted them on numerous private radio stations.<sup>4</sup>

*Jkesa Pfungwa* (Zimbabwe) worked to increase the participation of women in leadership positions in the communal area of Zaka. It carried out a needs assessment that provided strong evidence of the problematic

attitudes about women as leaders. Men said such things as "Some women engage in extra-martial affairs when they become leaders," and "God created Adam and Eve with Adam as leader." *Jkesa* developed messages with audience participation and designed a campaign that included talks, workshops, drama posters and other media. *Jkesa* set up four yardsticks to measure the results including input indicators, activity indicators, outcome indicators, and impact indicators. Despite limited time, a hostile political environment in the country, and a cyclone, *Jkesa* estimates it reached 500 men and women directly and 2,000 indirectly. After its campaign, more women attended community meetings and their participation as local leaders increased significantly (Morna, 2001, p.39).

#### *Results of the NGO Projects*

In these three African countries, the lead women's organisations were trained in how they can use the Internet to link better with each other and with the outside. Their understanding of the possible applications of ICT improved, as did their prudence in making choices. Many are saving costs through the use of E-mail in place of long-distance telephone calls and faxes. The ICT projects funded by the *Women Connect!* small grants yielded the following immediate tangible benefits:

- ◆ *Connectivity*: Nine organisations that did not have E-mail or Internet became connected.
- ◆ *Women's Internet Cafés*: Two organisations (in Zimbabwe and Zam-

bia) set up Internet cafés that also function as Internet learning centres. Both are training other women's groups, women parliamentarians and other women on how to use the Internet and are providing access to women whose organisations do not have E-mail and Internet access yet.

- ◆ *Websites*: Five organisations established Websites.
- ◆ *Repackaged Information*: Nine organisations repackaged information from the Internet for dissemination to key constituencies, one of these using radio. The information covered HIV/AIDS, reproductive health topics, and subjects targeted at young women in schools.

The media projects carried out under the *Women Connect!* small grants yielded the following immediate tangible benefits.

- ◆ *Campaigns*: Eight organisations conducted campaigns on topics such as reproductive health, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, women in decision-making, gender stereotypes, and women and the law. Others produced t-shirts, stickers, posters, flyers and information sheets on specific women's health and empowerment themes.
- ◆ *Research*: One organisation conducted research on why its advocacy work was failing to yield the desired results, and produced recommendations for more effective media strategies.
- ◆ *Community Publications*: Two organisations worked with communities to help them produce their own publications—one a newsletter and an-

other a training manual with strong emphasis on gender and health.

- ◆ *Calendars*: Two organisations produced calendars, one of which was an innovative motivational calendar emphasising new gender roles for women and men.

#### *Insights*

##### **Adoption/Use of ICT**

*Each organisation has unique needs and must find its own way to integrate ICT—gradually—into its work.* ICT cannot be used occasionally or superficially for it to become an effective organisational tool. Organisations must internalise ICT strategies in their activities, but the adoption of the technology must be strategic and gradual. Organisations just beginning to develop ICT capacity should resist the urge to design sophisticated Websites that are difficult to maintain.

*Introducing new technology into an organisation causes changes that place pressure on systems, relationships, and communication and management styles.* For example, will the system of one person's opening up regular mail be duplicated to the opening up of E-mail? Who will have access to the Internet and E-mail? In many developing countries, computers are typically tools for secretaries, not management. With the advent of Internet, it becomes necessary for management and other people in the organisation to develop technology skills. There is also a need within each NGO for a designated staff member to provide oversight of and leadership in ICT issues.



There is a need for women's organisations to engage at the ICT policy level. As the discussion continues about extending Internet access in developing countries, it is urgent that women's organisations speak strongly about the need for equitable access.

### Communication Campaigns and Strategic Use of Media

It is important that women's organisations conduct community-based research, including needs assessment and pre-tests, to be certain their messages are communicated clearly to their intended audiences, and to involve those audiences in the process. Some women's NGOs engaged in outreach do this already; many others welcome training in designing and doing needs assessments, participatory research, and testing of messages and materials. The process may be time-consuming and expensive, but groups learn that different target audiences receive messages in different ways and thus have to be reached in different ways.

Women's NGOs engaged in advocacy and outreach need to design and implement campaigns more strategically using multiple forms of media. Effective campaigns have limited objectives and measurable results. Research from around the world indicates that campaigns are most effective when multiple media (such as booklets, radio, posters and drama) are combined.

Women's organisations need to learn how to relate effectively to mass media professionals. Instead of looking at interaction with professionals (journalists, editors and even owners) only from their own point of view, wom-

**"What Women Connect! did was to plant a seed that can be watered and cultivated. There is no going back."**

*Musasa Project, Zimbabwe*

en's groups will be more effective if they develop long-term relationships that are mutually beneficial. This includes becoming known to reporters as local "experts" and "sources" of information, designing exciting and visual media events, and respecting journalists' deadlines. Organisations that have good relationships with mass media professionals are generally much more satisfied with how they are portrayed.

### The Way Forward

Through *Women Connect!*, an important foundation has been established for ongoing and future efforts. In the three African countries where the project focused, women's organisations and individual leaders in the women's movement were exposed, many for the first time, to more strategic thinking about how to do effective communication outreach. Groups incorporated this in their work and shared their learning and experiences with other organisations and women leaders. The participating organisations are now more keenly aware of the need to formulate communication strategies and to strengthen their use of ICTs and media.

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### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Women's health was the primary subject matter, shared with participants in case studies and other materials.
- <sup>2</sup> One of these groups was Isis-WICCE Uganda which, under the leadership of Ruth Ochieng, took the lead in encouraging other Ugandan women's groups to use ICT for advocacy, organising and information sharing.
- <sup>3</sup> Carole Roberts, technology coordinator for *Women Connect!*, designed and guided the ICT work.
- <sup>4</sup> See video of this and other *Women Connect!* Internet and media projects at <<http://www.annenberg.edu>>.