

WILMA: Making a Difference

By Rhona O. Bautista

In the current regime of globalised media, male-dominated information and communication structures, and crass commercialism, the library system of Isis International-Manila seems a puny effort. But this system—the Web-enabled Isis Library Management Automation system or WILMA—is one of the many steps the women's movements and other social justice movements have taken to build and strengthen capacities in the area of information management. It is one of Isis International-Manila's contributions to the feminist cause that challenge the corporate globalisation of the information industry.

WILMA puts in order all library records, books, serials, articles, special materials, country files, films, photographs, artworks and other resources according to type of material, subject category and keywords. It makes everything quick, easy and systematic, from indexing to editing to the search of particular records. It has a domino effect:

- It preserves the wealth of information resources and materials useful to women's resource centres, the women's movements and the public;
- It makes these resources accessible to women and the public a lot easier, thereby popularising the feminist cause.
- It links women's resource centres, groups and individuals, either through the Internet or through the non-proprietary technology transfer, carving out space in the world of "appropriated" media and information and communication structures.

Role of Resource Centres

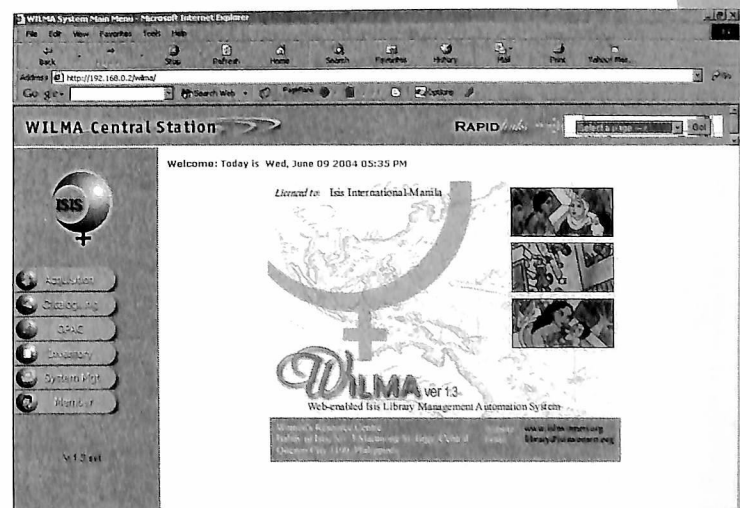
Vital to women's empowerment is access to information they need. Back in 1985, Kamla Bhasin said "We women must create alternatives in different media and use them to inform and empower women, to get women out of their isolation. We must make ourselves more visible and audible so that our concerns do not remain

unarticulated and unattended. Not only must we evolve alternative messages but alternative methods of working together; methods which are more democratic and participatory, and which break the divide between 'media makers' and 'media takers.'"¹

Access to information they need, when they need it is therefore vital to women's empowerment so that this information is studied, shared with other women's groups, and the lessons from such information are committed to mind, memory and heart.

Resource centres are important in the growth of the women's movement. They are more than repositories of reading materials; they document the lives of women and the development of the women's movement. In view of the challenges brought about by agents of globalisation in the 21st century, we have to open up spaces for women to produce knowledge that reflects their realities and contributes to their empowerment and the enhancement of their lives. Women's information and resource agencies should therefore be accorded significant part in the spaces that we need to safeguard and extend.

Unfortunately, libraries and resource centres that serve the needs of the women's sector and the women's movements in Third World countries are not enough. Most resource centres are not yet even computerised even if they



have access to computers because of lack of staff, resources, skills, training, or other priorities. Only 22 percent of women's population in Asia have access to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs).²

Other resource programmes of different governments as well as NGOs and independent groups are sparingly available, with limited materials and operating on manual and traditional modes. Majority of these information centres serve mainly the internal information needs of the organisation in their various activities such as organising, education, campaigns and networking. But increasingly, they are also servicing the information needs of other users—women activists, researchers from the academe, development agencies, and government. Their collections consist of materials written in the local dialects and foreign-language materials (mainly, English) from the West, as well as from the region. Due to the type of literature and nature of information processed in local and regional information centres, the duplication of work is common. Hence, valuable time and limited resources are wasted.

On the other hand, locally published materials, though commonly indexed by local centres, are often inaccessible to the regional and international clientele because they are in the local language. This problem poses a limitation on the amount and type of information that can be exchanged among different information centres in the region and beyond.

For Isis International-Manila, these are problems, limitations or challenges that could be resolved by taking the technology and transforming it into a cheap and easy tool.

Database Development

Towards this goal, Isis International-Manila pursued the full computerisation of its Resource Centre. This new system puts the Resource Centre online, and therefore can be used by women with access to the Internet.

■ MUJER

In 1991, Isis International was using a programme developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as far back as 1969 on the IBM mainframe using DOS—the CDS/ISIS (ver. 3.0) or Computerised Database System/Integrated Set of Information Systems. CDS/ISIS was later modified and expanded by UNESCO and released in 1985 as the Mini Micro CDS/ISIS. The software could be used on minicomputers, DEC/PCP-11 computers, microcomputers, IBM/PC-XT (Wang PC) computers, and IBM/PC-AT (Victor Sirius) computers. Both are compatible with the main-frame version, which makes it possible to link mainframe, mini and micro users.

CDS/ISIS is a menu-driven information storage and retrieval system designed specifically for the computerised management of non-numerical databases. Version 3.0 of CDS/ISIS provides full Local Area Network (LAN) (i.e., simultaneous access to a given database by two or more users for both searching and data entry. It may be used for the generation of current awareness bulletins, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and maintenance of user/borrower records.

The Isis International database, then called MUJER, contained 1,000 entries of indexed serials and catalogued books in the Manila office. With CDS/ISIS, information searches yielded information with just a few keystrokes and enabled the organisation to share information and link women and groups faster and with more accuracy and efficiency.

From 1992 to 1994, improvements were made on the MUJER design. Access to information became easier and faster by delimiting search points and removing those that the organisation found unnecessary.

■ WEB

In 1994, the Isis Resource Centre renamed the database Women Empowering Bibliographic Database or WEB. The programme underwent modification in 1995 to suit the organisation's changing needs. With WEB Database, Isis computer-assisted information search was made available to library users.

In 1997, using CDS/ISIS (ver. 3.07), the Isis Resource Centre redesigned the database and named it Isis PAC (Public Access Catalogue). The WEB database served as a backbone of the Open Public Access Catalogue. Through the help of Electronic Information Solutions,³ Isis was able to design a user-friendly interface for information search, retrieval and scanning. The design also allows direct use of Boolean Logic and pull-down menus of keywords in searching.

Two years after, the Isis Resource Centre team sought to make the database search mechanism more user-friendly by creating an improved menu for the MS-DOS interface. The Windows-based Information and Library Management (WILMA) system was born.

■ WILMA

WILMA is a cost-effective software because it makes use of purely open-source technologies. It runs on Linux operating system and uses a PostgreSQL database engine. With the open-source software, end users are assured of reliability and quality, reduced prices, and increased freedom to improve the programme.

WILMA: as basic as A-E-I-O-U

Adaptable – allows to define a set of data elements, adapt to your deployment requirements like restrict catalogue inside the office or open to public access (OPAC) through the Internet.

Easy to deploy and maintain – WILMA is installed only in the server. Anybody with the browser may access the centre's information, provided that they have authorised access.

Inexpensive – The backend components are all under different open-source software licensing schemes that can be downloaded from the Internet.

Open-Source – promotes software reliability and quality by supporting independent peer review and rapid evolution of source code.⁴

User-Friendly – provides simplified and user-friendly interface for its data entry and searching screens through a browser-based interface.

The Isis Resource Centre extended the simple public access catalogue into a library management system to integrate acquisitions, inventory and database maintenance functions that made the system vastly more user-friendly, besides reducing the labour required by inventories, monitoring, acquisitions, data searches and print-outs.

WILMA provides the central working station for the tasks of acquiring materials, cataloguing, searching through online public access catalogue (OPAC), inventory of materials and catalogue database maintenance. This simple innovation could be a starting point for other Women's Resource Centres and Documentation Centres seeking to improve their library systems or considering to computerise this.

It took years of patience and hard work for the Isis Resource Centre to come to this level of technology. It was no easy task developing a database that would suit the needs of the organisation, considering the extent of advocacy embedded in its programmes and activities. There were problems encountered in the design and data entry of records. The debugging process and modifications were tedious. Assessment and testing were constant. The whole learning experience was crucial to making the Isis Resource Centre a better training ground for women in Resource

Centre and Information Management.

Surfing Forward

WILMA introduces the "Open-Source (OS) and Free Software" movement that advocates and promotes the use of non-proprietary computer programmes and operating systems—which means these applications are readily available, easily altered, and disseminated without barriers.

Soon, WILMA will be available to Isis Resource Centre members on the Internet and later, as a non-Web-based library management system using non-proprietary technology. WILMA's being accessible on the Internet will make the Resource Centre's materials available to women's resource centres throughout the region and to all those who have access to the Internet. As Isis International is technologically ahead of other Resource Centres in the region, sharing our experiences and technology with other women's resource centres is one of the unique contributions we can make. Since there are many local and national women's organisations without ready access to computers, let alone the Internet, there is high demand for Isis' technological and training support services, particularly in connection with resource centre and information management.

As a continuing service to the women's movement, Isis International will provide a non-web based tool to respond to the diverse ways women's resource centres in the region access, manage and move information. This project will provide them a low-cost alternative software that does not require Internet connectivity. Hopefully, the database programme will be available in 2005 to women's resource centres, especially those in the Asia and the Pacific region. ♪

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Footnotes

- ¹ Bhasin, Kamla, "Women, Developmen, and Media" in *Women and Media—Analysis, Alternatives and Action*. Published by Kali for Women, Isis International and Asian Women's Forum, 1984. p. 18
- ² *NGO_Women@asia.net: The Use of Information and Communication Technologies By Women's Organisations in Seven Asian Countries: A Regional Study*. Published by Isis International-Manila, 2002, 85 p. ISBN 971-8829-10-5.
- ³ Electronic Information Solutions, Inc., a consultancy and technical group servicing libraries specially large academic libraries in Manila.
- ⁴ See <<http://www.opensource.com>>.