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## **Women, Communication Rights and the Internet**

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## **Women, Communication Rights and the Internet By Womenspace, Canada**

### **Introduction**

Canada is one of the leading nations in facilitating its population to get online and applying ICTs to government. Geographically it is the second largest country in the world, with its 30 million population spread across vast distances. There is good reason to use the internet.

Womenspace is a Federally registered Canadian non-profit organization which promotes women's participation in information and communication technology. Our activities include the development of online resources and learning, research, education and initiatives which support the use of Internet for women's equality. We work for the inclusion of women and women's organizations in all areas of ICT policy development and implementation. We are based near Ottawa, Ontario. Our members come from across Canada and we have senior workers in Vancouver and Montreal. We use virtual office software for internal document sharing, discussions, a calendar and planning. We have been closely networked with Canadian women's groups since we held the Women's Internet Conference in 1997. We have run one continuous mailing list since 1996, and use short term E-Mail Lists for more focused discussions. Our web site was created in 1995 and was taken to the Beijing conference on a 3.5 " disk.

### **Project Summary: Using the Internet to Affect Social Policy**

The Canadian government and the voluntary sector have been involved in a process of negotiating how they might work more closely together. One result has been the appointment of a Minister for the Voluntary Sector (October 2002). The SIDPD (Sector Involvement with Departmental Policy Development) was created in 2001, giving contributions to some voluntary organizations to each work in partnership with a specific federal government department. Womenspace successfully applied for funding to work with Status of Women Canada on "Using The Internet to Affect Social Policy". Womenspace leads this two-year project to build the online capacity of women's equality-seeking organizations to participate in developing and implementing social policy. The project will use a variety of methods to encourage women's participation in online consultations using a publicly accessible web site containing project materials and a policy tool kit. An online consultation and report on "Women, Communication Rights and the Int development of a unified approach in preparation for the March 2003 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. In addition, a large national consultation involving women's equality-seeking organizations and government representatives will take place in 2003 to prepare a set of principles for using the internet to involve women's equality-seeking groups in the social policy process.

The project began with a Brainstorming meeting of representatives of women's groups from across Canada, in March 2002, where we shared information about the project and received feedback and support. Federal government representatives shared information about government online and the policy process. The first meeting of the project Advisory group took place in June 2002, where a Technical Committee was struck, to review software and offer advice. Members of both committees come from across Canada. The committee members' internet skills ranged from running a server for an organization to being unable to open an attachment to an email. In all, 24 women from 15 women's organizations are involved in the working committees.

## **The Online Consultation**

An early step in the project has been an online pan-Canadian consultation on "Women, Communication Rights and the Internet", which ran for 5 weeks in September/October 2002. It was conducted in both English and French, with all materials available in both languages. The consultation ran 8 WebBoards for 5 weeks (4 in each language) and 8 E-Mail Lists for 3 weeks. The consultation was framed by forthcoming international events, particularly the 47th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (March 2003) which will look at Women and Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and the World Summit on the Information Society (December 2003) which already has a Gender Caucus. The DAW and INSTRAW international online NGO discussions and the aide memoire for the DAW Expert Group meeting (November 2002) were particularly helpful to our preparations. International documents, including communication rights and the UN Convention on Human Rights (1949), the UN Division for the Advancement of Women Expert Group aide memoire, and Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). At home we were affected by Canadian women's groups' experience of using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the difficulties they have faced, including their general lack of access to support through federal ICT programs. The main development of Canadian internet policy has been based on geographical distribution of access, rather than social issues, and has no overall gendered analysis. There are therefore many gaps in access.

## **PIES**

We divided the subject of women and ICT into 4 Issues, Participation (communication rights and internet access), Impact (the effect of the internet on women's lives), Empowerment (engaging in online opportunities for information, learning and work) and Strategies (using the internet to work together for women's equality). We referred to these as P-I-E-S. The Advisory Group considered the now traditional approach of publishing background papers on each issue, which would lead to an debate on a E-Mail List. But the range of issues and viewpoints led us into asking questions, first of ourselves, and then of participants. The questions were for cherry picking, not a survey. We hoped that some questions would elicit a response from viewers so that they would write about their knowledge and experience. They did not need to answer every question. Each one of the PIES had a range of 6 to 8 questions. For those wanting to get their teeth into more detailed questions we supplied supplementary questions to each one of the PIES main pages. Additionally, we included an overview of the consultation and backgrounders on the web site to place each issue in context of Canadian and global discussions.

People were able to click from a PIES web page to either sign up to join a E-Mail List or to write to a WebBoard. There were 4 E-Mail Lists in English and 4 in French - two for each of the PIES. There are also WebBoards for each of the PIES, in both French and English. Since networking and community building play an important part in working online, we wanted to facilitate people speaking to like-minded others, so asked everyone to voluntarily fill in a 4 question profile about themselves. All signed up participants were able to see each others' profiles.

While it would have been possible to simply send out invitations to join in we wanted a more grassroots strategy, to encourage participation and give confidence in the consultation. Ten women's organizations, four francophone and six anglophone, came forward to facilitate the E-Mail Lists and WebBoard discussions. They were able to reach their membership and facilitate their participation because they were trusted and known to their membership.

### **Offline Strategies**

Solely holding a consultation online would have left out those who had no internet access and would have compounded that lack of access. We therefore designed an offline strategy of phone calls, faxes, including tapping in to fax trees, print advertisements, going to meetings, and asking specific groups to take their membership to a public access site. Based on our previous experience and research, our main concerns were women in rural and remote areas, immigrant women, women with disabilities and racialized women. Four grassroots groups took members to a public library and logged in to the consultation. Notes were taken of the offline process and the newly logged on contributed to the online discussions. It was reported back "There was a very positive energy during the session. They wanted to make a difference. This is just a start." They commented "I think there is a need to have face to face interaction in order to get people to participate. This consultation is close to our hearts and we know its importance. So we take time to do this." All of the groups used the telephone to organize responses and a national organization used the telephone extensively to gather views and experience.

Womenspace also made 53 phone calls to women's groups who had no internet access. 11 responded positively by answering questions over the phone. 20 groups said they were too busy or did not follow up a message left with an individual. In 2 cases the consultation facilitator used the telephone to talk an individual through the process of getting online and contributing. Many of the issues raised over the telephone mirrored those in the online survey of women's organizations, including the price and maintenance of hardware and software, and the lack of in service training to help them understand and integrate ICTs into the work of their organizations. The offline groups generally understood the internet to be a place to research and find information, and only one indicated that it could also be used by their constituency. The barriers to joining an online consultation also included time, money and lack of knowledge about ICTs.

The existence of a gendered digital divide affected our planning and implementation of the consultation. Knowing that many women had lower levels of access meant that we presented materials in a way which allowed them to contribute even if they had no email address. With a shortage of personal time and a short timeframe in a public access centres we presented materials so that contributions and reading could take place in a few minutes. Every aspect had to be easily available using a slow modem on a telephone line. It had to be available in ways which allowed for text readers for women with sight impairments. We

were unable to provide free email addresses, although this would have facilitated women's online access without them receiving the ubiquitous spam, some of which includes pornography.

Womenspace set up a closed E-Mail List for consultation facilitators, so that they could talk to each other, as well as to the consultation project team. This turned out to be a lively place. We had initially asked facilitators to use the facilitator E-Mail List to share their weekly summaries of discussions on the E-Mail Lists and WebBoards. We were looking for overlap between the PIES and ways to take points from one part of the PIES to another. We had in fact connected the most internet experienced equality seeking women in their own forum, and included a few who were eager to learn more. It was a place for sharing information, discussing issues, and giving answers to technical questions. In the last week of the consultation members began to look ahead and ask "what next?"

## Online Survey

The consultation included an online traditional survey for women's organizations, which was completed by 23. Unsurprisingly, lack of funding for equipment, training, access, support, and maintenance was the number one issue. If money for these basics is denied, everything else becomes irrelevant, such as content, service delivery, and citizen participation in e-government.

This lack is particularly frustrating given that the survey shows that online women clearly realize the value of the technology for their organizations; especially, that it allows them to collaborate more with other organizations and increases their own organization's visibility. The benefit of the internet to women's organizations noted the least was that the internet made it "easier to catch the attention of government"(3.2%), while networking with other organizations was first. When asked to describe further benefits to their organization several pointed out that "clients" might feel more comfortable checking them out on the internet before coming through the door, that they could offer more in depth information online, and interested people are able to use the internet to keep up with the work of the organization. Some saw the internet as an "excellent communication tool to reach people who may not be inclined to walk in the door for that initial contact". Online environments which support a diversity of women's voices online were seen as the most important internet content issue, and there was an expressed need for diversity sensitive online materials, particularly for racialized women and immigrant women. In the face of e-government it was perceived that the most pressing need was for information on forthcoming online consultations, followed closely by the need to strategize together to have input to those consultations.

And, finally, to begin planning for the time when funding for ICT moves beyond the basics, there must be "Initiative (funding) to take online to the next level - fundraising, building constituency."

Concurrently, funding guidelines must contain clear ICT components, as must applications or proposals for funding. Funders and fundees may need assistance to develop these guidelines, as well as to develop a sound technology plan. It is clear from the survey responses that organizations are often forced into catch-as-catch can technology setups, eking by with outdated and inadequate equipment, access, and software.

With advent of online delivery of services and e-democracy, it is no longer a luxury to have computers and internet access, it is a necessity. Otherwise the basics of our government are denied to technology-deprived citizens. While providing a computer and internet access to every individual is not feasible, or even necessarily desirable, organizations that provide holistic access to and support of these critical technologies can fill the gap providing they are adequately and creatively supported. When women and their ICT capacity building are funded, the talents they acquire will spill over to their families, their workplaces, and the organizations in which they volunteer. As one respondent said "I think (these) also apply as well to men. Of much more importance is the issue of class/economics. These are not as much feminist issues as humanist issues - are we really providing equality for all humans?"

Equality of ICT resources for women's organizations is an excellent beginning, not an end.

## Consultation Discussion

Consultation participants were given 3 ways to give us their feedback on the process of the consultation and the content. Send an email, or answer an online questionnaire, or take part in a weblog. A weblog (or blog) starts by people giving their views, and then allows others to reply or build on those views, so that the consultation could be evaluated by an open conversation between participants.

Participation rates: The numbers of participants grew steadily over the 5 weeks of the consultation, more on the English side of the discussions than on the French. On the WebBoard we were able to track 'views' the number of times topics were accessed as well as posts. This is not the same as the number of "hits" (one of those words which indicate how little effect women have had on the internet), but a much more accurate assessment of interest in the web site. The total number of views on the WebBoard topics were over 4500, and the posting of WebBoard messages totaled 271; the registered users were 110, but more women participated than registered (there was no requirement to register). The E-Mail Lists had an additional 200 members, and over 150 messages were posted on the lists over 3 weeks. The Women and the Internet Survey was answered on behalf of 23 organizations.

While we designed the questions as the PIES, one issue, violence against women, appeared in every forum, sometimes painfully. All of the violence related issues, including trafficking, pornography, sex tourism, and "missing" women and girls need a more thorough examination in the light of the internet. In a face to face meeting, an aboriginal women's organization discussed the effect of some of these issues on them. The sensitivity of these issues may need both more focused and more private online discussions.

We also only touched on other major issues for women, particularly privacy and online safety. Telehealth was only glanced at, yet is becoming an important issue, both in the value of diagnosis and treatment of disease over long distances, and in the increasing burden of unpaid work for women in the home, who will be enabled to use broadband access in particular to undertake procedures for sick relatives which would only previously been carried out in a medical facility.

The consultation web site (<http://consult.womenspace.ca>) was a vital component. It was educational because we presented the very complex issues in small chunks, while allowing a more complex view, if people wanted to click further into the web site. It also provided a reference point and continuity for participants. People could see the WebBoards and the

discussions as they unfolded. They could see the work of Womenspace and provide their comments. We used it to give transparency to the consultation process. Weekly summaries of the discussions on each WebBoard and on each E-Mail List were posted on the web site. E-Mail List contributions were archived on the site. The final report of the event will be published on the website, so that those who so generously gave their time can see something for their efforts.

There were lessons for us too. We were reminded of the importance of face to face meetings and personal connections by the willingness and hard work of facilitating groups. They had been to two face to face meetings (March and June 2002) and involved in pilot consultation approaches over the summer. Their understanding of the project added to its effectiveness and to the outreach.

The technology, while not the focus of the work, both tempted us with its possibilities and frustrated us with its difficulties. For example, when we realized that the consultation software needed a greater range than our web host provided, we were fortunate enough to be sufficiently well resourced that we could move our entire web site to another host. An unusual situation for a women's organization. The move consumed an inordinate amount of time. On the fun side, we played with a chat room for a time, and may use one in the future. In the end time was not on our side. This pan-Canadian event was planned and carried out in 7 months.

The offline strategy was not in the initial plan, but it became a vital component for inclusion and participation. Its growth was ecological, as we responded to the issues and importance of hearing from those who cannot be part of an information society.

## **Learning**

The consultation was a learning curve for all involved. As in much internet work, we were additionally engaged in adult education. An aim of the Voluntary Sector Initiative is to increase capacity in the voluntary sector. We have no doubt that every one of us, the committees, the Womenspace team, and the facilitating women's groups fulfilled that aim. In many cases we also increased the capacity of women's organizations and individuals to use the internet, and to consider its potential.

Almost all online women's groups and individuals are self taught in internet use. All are therefore highly motivated. Some individuals have a strong need for the connection that the internet brings (for example, women at home with young children, single parents, people with disabilities or infirmity). Because the internet has grown so rapidly in such a relatively short period of time there is still a widespread shared experience. For example, all internet users can laugh about wondering whether their first email arrived at its destination. For this short period of time learning how to use the internet bridges many other gaps between individuals. On the other hand, because of the lack of an overall internet application strategy, individual and organizational capacity to apply ICTs is uneven, from simply placing a mission statement online to experienced online community builders.

For many the issue is still that the technology gets in the way. Other than computer crashes, women's groups cite lack of time to learn how to use it. There is still the need to see beyond the hardware and software to how to apply the technology to the mission of organizations. In most cases there has been a community development approach to internet use by women's

organizations. This is the problem of not knowing what you don't know. Inability to engage is based on ignorance born of lack of time and resources, not on making a well informed choices.

Informal peer learning and mentorship play a large part in internet use. As one person said "I think access to support is also a major barrier". Peers are more likely to be trusted because they share similar experiences. They are likely to be more aware of how the internet can be applied to their specific situation and can therefore quickly share the relevance of the internet. There is a need to organize a more focused peer support system so that more people have complementary knowledge of applying the internet. As one participant suggest "maybe we should start a Women-Technology Buddy program?". A member of the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) stated "helping to build technical capacity of our members is very much a critical strategy for us".

Online consultations offer enormous potential for education. Having the questions all in one place online was an important component in educating people about the issues. The range of questions we designed showed clearly the high degree to which the internet impinges on women's equality. Individual responses to the consultation added to the knowledge. In particular the WebBoard allowed people to scan contributions and learn from each other. A weblog, where people can respond and build on each others contributions has great potential for sharing. Online consultations should be thought of as opportunities to inform and educate, as well as ways to gather views and experience.

While leadership is needed to increase awareness and share knowledge, the contributors have an important part to play. The internet does not need to be a top down medium; it can be an arena for sharing information and developing knowledge cooperatively. Leadership increasingly lies with sharing information freely and encouraging participation and debate between contributors. We still need to identify and organize strategies for online leadership, encouraging participation and thereby increasing the knowledge and capacity of all participants. Doing this online requires particular skills and support networks, which still remain to be researched and learned by the vast majority of participants.

## **Leadership and Community Development**

The consultation showed a widening gap between those who are experienced internet users and those who have yet to perceive much value in the new technologies. The offline telephone calls showed a fear of junk mail and online pornography. Offline groups emphasized face to face work rather than using the internet, not seeing them as complementary. More than 30 per cent of offline groups contacted indicated that they were too busy with their work to learn about the internet, let alone use it. On the other hand, the consultation, like other online women's equality work, attracted some individual women asking for particular help or information (which they received). As the internet becomes more widespread, an increasing number of women are using it to seek help and look for connection to others in a similar situation. Women's groups who are not applying the internet to their work are increasingly likely to bypass some of the people and issues that they represent and to miss the opportunity to build new forms of community. The online absence of some women's groups is also putting an increasing load on those who are present on the internet and are able to use the networks of online communities to address issues and concerns.



Women's groups who are online have provided valuable leadership to many women being able to positively apply the internet to their lives. The consultation showed a growing network of equality seeking women's groups, and a willingness to share, network, cooperate and strategize. During the event groups supported others getting online and helping their membership increase their skills. Part of the success was because the work was sufficiently well funded for groups to take the time to share their knowledge and experience. Part was the peer to peer work. It is important to value, support and learn from those who have taken on the challenge of applying the internet to women's equality work. Their leadership is an asset to civic participation and a more engaged society.

One group said that they resented being pushed to get online. Still, they participated in the consultation. They are an example of the difficulty that the rapidly changing knowledge society can bring to community development. The group really needed much more time and resources to learn about the potential, possibilities and applicability of the internet to their work. Yet they knew they were being left behind, and that time was not on their side. We need to find the balance between encouraging change, while supporting those who have taken on applying the technology to women's equality work, often at great cost to themselves in terms of time and money.

Inexperienced groups called for others to create web sites and databases as forms of service to their organizations. This "add on" approach misses the point of planning and implementing strategic internet use as an integral part of the work of an organization.

There is a serious gap in knowing how to apply the internet to equality work. From the basic issues, such as where a computer is placed in an office, and how to handle incoming email, to planning how to use the internet to effectively recruit volunteers, inform people of the work, enhance the mission of the organization and create a more efficient and effective board. Addressing this needs further research, analysis and planning.

## **Participation and Communication Rights**

The Participation section of the consultation was the busiest. Access is still a major issue, sometimes expressed as a fear of being "left behind". Reasons given included have to be the biggest barrier for most women. Lower pay, difficulty obtaining credit, and the high cost of connecting all hit women harder than men". Time was an important factor for many participants "Time is always an issue for most of these women who are busy taking care of their families and trying to earn a living especially as immigrant women who are disadvantaged in many regards."

Women have less online access than men, for all the usual gender-related reasons. - time, money, control, learning opportunities, other commitments, prioritizing others' needs. As the internet becomes the major form of communication there are implications for the future education, employment and civic participation of women.

The preponderance of English on the internet has the effect of discouraging participation. The UNDP Human Development report of 2000 reported that 80 per cent of web sites were in English, while only 4 per cent were in French. Francophones are less likely to find appropriate online material in their first language, and therefore are less likely to wish to get online. Speakers of other languages can also find that their minority status makes it difficult for them to find appropriate keyboards and software. Language carries culture, and the

widespread use of English online can be a threat to cultural diversity. It is difficult to value and apply the internet when it does not reflect your experience and is in another language.

The right to communicate is central to social struggle and vital to the work of all NGOs. All too often communication is ignored in favour of the technology. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights came long before the internet. An update would be helpful to teasing out the many elements to communication, from rights to information, to cultural diversity, to privacy, to protection from hate, to build community and to civic participation. The internet holds the capacity to change the interactivity of communication, and to share power.

## **Violence Against Women**

The effectiveness of the internet for women subjected to violence drew the most debate, and appeared in every section of the consultation. Almost all contributions to this discussion were from women who identified as abused, usually in the past. There was agreement that the internet helped break down the isolation experienced by many abused women. One participant argued that the online support would encourage women to stay longer in a personally dangerous situation because it gave her another “coping mechanism”. Others argued that it opened up options and gave support through the changes a woman faced. One said that the internet is “one of the few areas where I do feel some control”. The Ontario Women’s Justice Network said of their web site “Women tell us that this information helps them make informed decisions and feel more confident during legal proceedings.” While the online information was very helpful it also raised expectations that the organization could offer more services than were possible. One suggestion was “I see having an online community that continues to support the abused women after they leave as being just as important. This may be something we can talk about developing if no such group exists.”

There were a few contributions on online pornography. Feminist debates on pornography have been vigorous in the past. But in these cases the concern was centred on the “push” of the technology, that pornographic materials arrived in email without warning and available to children. As one person said this “means that children are receiving them too. Young minds are very impressionable - what do these posts say to teen males or females? Does it tell the young ladies that they have no value except for their appearance and sexual talents? Do the young men learn that women have little value except for satisfying their desires?” The laws on what they are allowed to send over the internet are very lax and will only change if enough of us voice our demands for change.”

## **Empowerment in Work and Learning**

A transformation is occurring in how we do things and how we find the resources we need in our daily lives, for ourselves and our families. Increasing our control over such a powerful medium as the internet enhances our capacities and potential effectiveness. Women pointed to their experiences of informing themselves online, for example, on health or consumer issues, which enhanced their capacity. Supported by the information they had researched online they were better prepared to negotiate for resources to meet their needs. For others, the community that one can settle into online is “magnificent..after leaving a messy relationship, I found deep comfort and solace in an online community”.

The internet can enhance our knowledge and skills, and may be opening up new opportunities for employment for women. Some of these employment opportunities are technical, such as those related to web development, software applications, computer hardware and communications infrastructure. Other opportunities arise in the development of content and strategies on how to use the technologies. "This is where the writer, educational designer and subject experts who understand the technology and possibly team up with technical experts are needed" for web-based learning and workplace learning. Another area of growth due to technology is knowledge management. Not all of the jobs that are created by technology are technical in themselves.

With the internet, work happens in a different way: "more people are consulted, networks are wider, and email and websites become part of how we raise issues and do our work." It makes work more effective and reaches so much further. It is hard to limit the workload as there is more networking to do, email to answer, and much to do and learn. Many of the new opportunities are about how we do our work, rather than the creation of new jobs. For example, "it has raised expectations among clients, government and ourselves as to the level of information demands and quality of information presentation."

The internet increases the possibilities to exchange goods and provide services for clients across great geographical distances. Some women found new opportunities because of the technology itself, as in providing web development services. Others used the internet to support the buying and selling of artwork, crafts, non-technical and support services nationally and internationally.

We do not yet know whether it will be women's businesses or the corporations who will reap the benefits of increased online economic activity. We need to ensure that there is a strategy for women to really benefit economically from the internet. There was strong concern about the limited regulation of working from home, the lack of protection for women's health and safety, the number of hours worked, and what effect this might have on pay equity. This may involve issues about women and self-employment, and/or contract negotiations with businesses. Women noted the convenience and flexible hours of working from home, even though the hours were often long, and extended late night and/or early mornings. While women preferred to have the choice of whether or not to work from home, the conditions of working from home vary widely with women's economic and domestic circumstances.

There needs to be greater focus on the conditions of work, the hours, and the demands on women who work from home. There is a need for protections and benefits for home-workers. Employment policies would need to be further developed to protect women's rights when working from home, as these increasingly involve transnational employment arrangements. The downside of the internet might include the creation of "millions of little sweatshops

Sometimes it is work which migrates rather than people. One participant said that she works from home on contract from across the border in the United States of America. It is a positive experience for her, and she says that it would not have been possible without the internet. While she appears to be sufficiently well remunerated it may be that data work will increasingly go to the ever lower paid around the world.

New opportunities in computer services, data entry, and tele-work may provide women with employment. Yet, the conditions associated with some of these positions may not lend themselves to empowerment for women. For example, repetitive strain injuries which are

associated with computer use are often not recognized as 'work-related injuries' eligible for compensation. Negotiating health issues can be difficult: "I am supposed to take 10 min per hour from the computer to prop myself into a hyper reflexed position on a heating pad. How realistic is this - It's not!" The potential for women to use the internet for gaining greater control in their work lives may depend on more networking and organizing around the conditions of women's work.

It becomes necessary for women to expand their knowledge and skills to take advantage of these new economic opportunities. The internet can make learning easier. Distance learning, lifelong education, community learning and informal information networking contribute to the capacity of women to use the internet to enhance knowledge and skills. "Distance ed courses that incorporate an online component and include group discussions and online projects have transformed distance education into a more complete educational experience." On the other hand, expectations on teachers have meant that work loads have increased: "Teaching on-line is very time consuming and now there is an immediate expectation for instant answering and instant feedback. Expectations of the learner and the facilitator are changing."

Women are using the internet for learning. Online directories can help with finding courses, and many courses are now offered by distance learning, making it more possible for women to take courses without having to relocate close to the institution, and to take courses at times convenient to them. Participating online requires basic computer skills, and once online there are many guides to learning more about internet tools and facilities. Informally, women are networking and providing resources which may be enabling women in specific situations, e.g., health-related or living in violent relationships, to take steps towards greater control in their lives.

Yet, the learning needed to keep up with the new online possibilities requires additional time, and it has been suggested that this is a 'third shift' for women. Unless women are supported and resourced to take up the new learning opportunities, the skills required by new technologies sit as an additional burden to women's existing workload, which often makes it impossible for women to take them up.

There may also be caregiving opportunities through online technology which, in the coming years, may add to women's workload. Broadband access is available in the cities. A fast connection opens up many opportunities, such as in health. How long before outpatient care is transferred online to teach home carers some of the skills now associated with a hospital Outpatient department? What will be the effect on women, especially those at home taking care of sick or elderly relatives? It is not yet clear how the internet which enables women to work from home, may contribute to increasing levels of unpaid work required of women in caring for their extended family networks.

## **An Electronic Strategy**

Information haves and have-nots do not happen by accident. The present implementation of a knowledge society is allowing the inequities of racism and sexism to be repeated and embedded into the future. If we allow that the internet is a powerful tool, then distributing it within existing power structures can only result in further inequality. Policy decisions need to take better account of those who are becoming marginalized by communications technology, by including those who will be affected by the policy-making process. If inequities are to be overcome, there need to be socially sensitive programs, which are analyzed to ensure the

participation of marginalized groups. The most effective way for these to occur will be from the ground up, rather than being top down.

Since 1997 women's equality seeking organizations have called for a gender sensitive strategy in the development of Canada's policy and programs for connecting the population. The efforts of Status of Women Canada have enabled some internet and communication technologies initiatives to be developed, and have provided forums for women's organizations to discuss the issues together. A few provincial initiatives have enabled some women's organizations to access the internet. However, the lack of gender-based analysis in federal government ICT policies and programmes has contributed to the digital divide.

An electronic strategy for women would need to address the diversity of the Canadian population, and enable a range of approaches. In general this needs to include: Mentorship programs to connect women, support for learning in appropriate settings where women are comfortable and safe, and childcare is provided; promotion of new initiatives to explore the possibilities of communications technologies; the capacity for women to access the internet and learning through their local women's centres, recognition and support for the women champions/leaders in the community who can organize and build momentum for women's internet learning; resources to enable the integration of ICTs in the work of women's organizations.

A strategy to increase the online capacity of women's organizations needs to recognize that organizations generally go through phases in their use of the Internet - communicating via email, searching for information on the Net, establishing a web presence by creating a web site. Some organizations quickly move to including interactive dialogue on their sites while others remain at the web site stage for a long period of time. There is need for support in the use of the internet as a) an awareness tool: to promote our issues, and support informational resources, b) a form of media: to develop ways of getting our voices out, extend electronic networking, women's radio online, communication inter-activities, and c) a way to engage in policy issues with the government: to prepare for civic participation, e-democracy, online consultations.

Measures need to be taken to ensure that women and women's organizations will be consulted by government on policy issues. At the same time there is a need to facilitate the development of women's capacity in understanding the technology and in online consultation. Resources are required to assist women's equality organizations in analyzing the issues in preparation for consultations. Learning how to use the technology is only a part of successful participation. Being informed about the issue, be critical about the issue and being able to articulate ones' point of view is also essential. Collaboration amongst organizations, sharing information and strategizing together – enhanced by online capabilities – are important factors in effective participation on policy issues.

Building community online and learning from each other are key to women's use of the internet for equality. The mentoring and support offered during this Womenspace online consultation was critical in women's successful participation with internet tools that were new to them. "I was able to get information while learning the technology from their peers. This was great." Technical support was provided as a learning tool to help women understand the steps involved in using the forums, and networking support was offered through extended outreach via collaborating women's organizations, with particular attention to groups which were identified as less likely to have experience with the technology. The reported experience of participating for women new to the online technology

was generally one of initial timidity, learning, confidence building and empowerment. It is important to note that the presence of support enabled the necessary learning curve to be accomplished so that women could participate fully in the issues, and that the sense of learning together with other equality-seeking women was a vital factor in building an empowering environment.

As part of the electronic strategy women expressed interest in an integrated web site / portal that classifies and lists most if not all web resources on women equality; lists events; lists existing mail lists, web-based discussion and chat events; gives information about civic participation and consultations; provides both public and private space for women to discuss issues; may schedule and conduct their own online consultation on topics as needed; has an ongoing online discussion - be it asynchronous or synchronous, mail list or WebBoard; a digitization of the past 30 years of women's herstory, since the Royal Commission on the Status of Women; wherever possible to have materials digitized into audio format; have video streams of important materials and/or events. It is important to have the information or learning event in a format that is conducive to knowledge construction, both personal and "communal".

## Government Online

One of the issues facing us is how to ensure that the Canadian government website, which has numerous ways of find information, has an appropriate route for women to find relevant information. Consideration has been given to several 'audiences', for example youth and seniors. Such a 'gateway' for information directs people to the information that may be particularly useful for them.

So far the federal government has shown little interest in developing a 'gateway' for women on their web site. Consultation discussion focused on the need for such a gateway, and the importance of the involvement of women's organizations in its development. Women addressed the issue of visibility, asking "How are government online services that are primarily being used by women (for themselves or their families) going to be visible to women?" There are serious implications to having no visibility of 'women' on the Canada site. The web site is thought to be "a rough blueprint of the forthcoming 'new' reorganized federal e-government. With no presence of women, e-government will become the organizing principal for the entire government." And further "the Federal, Municipal, Provincial and Territorial governments are all cooperating on e-government. The lack of women on the Federal site is likely to mean no visibility of women at any other level of government either."

The visibility of women on the government site would help to "send a statement to women that the Government of Canada welcomes them and pays attention to their concerns. (Of course, the statement would then have to be backed up with action! )" It would provide a "forum - to assess the usages of services designed for women and to survey what other services are needed or how can the service be more efficient and effective." Also "during the design process, many of the content appropriateness issues will emerge and may 'force' the government or the group responsible to address these" A few women expressed a "fear that a 'women's gateway' would define women's issues as child care and health," and raised the challenge of how women's issues are defined and who defines them. The information would need to have an equality focus; otherwise we may well end up with more 'advice to women' in our caregiving roles.

Should women be fighting for a gateway for women? The challenges ahead on this question involves key issues in the processes by which it would be achieved. For example “who is going to develop the gateway and how is it going to be done?”; “what will be the process of involving women (in the know) in the design and maintenance of the gateway”, creating a vehicle that speaks “with us and not AT US”. Strong statements were made supporting the need for a collaborative approach would be more useful to women and develop shared ownership. “When done in a collaborative way that produce positive experiences, the participants will become the champion of the gateway. They will end up promoting and continue to support the site. Of course, the government has to pay for this - no different from them paying for the other gateways.” There would also need to be improved usability testing strategies.

## **E-government**

Canada, in common with many other countries, is rapidly implementing e-government, applying ICTs to both government and governance. With the potential of using ICTs for “direct democracy”, as opposed to representative democracy, e-government represents a fundamental change in the way a democratic society works. It opens up the communication of government information, and has the potential to enable greater online participation by members of society, through the use of surveys, e-mail lists, webboards and chat rooms. Existing inequalities in internet access and digital literacy will further restrict the civic involvement of those marginalized in Canadian society.

A gendered digital divide in an era of e-government has implications for all concerned about women’s equality. Capacity to apply ICTs will become a necessity for those wishing to participate in much of the coming social policy processes. This consultation is one step in developing ways to do our own consultations, and developing our skills for online civic participation. We need to find ways to have input into the planning stages of government consultations, as well as to develop our coordinated strategies for participation.

Thinking about civic participation online raised many questions. The advantage of reaching many women across great distances was weighed against the uncertainty about the processes being developed and the potential to exclude and disempower those groups of women who are not yet online, including racialized women, immigrant women, and aboriginal women. Concerns were voiced on whether and how women’s organizations would be included in federal government online consultations, or whether women’s organizations (and other NGOs) would be disintermediated in favour of market-research models. If consultation processes focus on individuals rather than organizations with expertise on equality issues, how will gender-based analyses of issues be undertaken and incorporated into the consultations being conducted?

Preparing ourselves for online consultation and other forms of online engagement was recognized as a critical issue for women and our communication rights: “It is time to prepare ourselves to participate”, “we need to have input into these developments if they are going to sensitive to women's situations”, “we must ensure they are going to include women's equality organizations”, we should “become familiar with the tools that can be used to engage in civic participation - like this forum software”, we need to learn more about “other successful applications of the internet for civic participation” and network with the people “we should calling an online meeting or ongoing discussion area to talk more about these

issues, after this consultation". We know that we need to be well-informed and experienced with online consultations and a variety of internet software applications, if we are to develop our capacity to engage effectively in the coming e-government developments.

Organizations will need to develop new strategies to be able to effectively participate in e-government. The first will be the capacity to affect the policy process in the issue identification and research stages, rather than after an online consultation has been announced. Ensuring equality issues are on the e-government agenda and that there is a gendered approach to all e-government policy will take enormous resources of time and labour. 1) There will need to be cooperative approaches to identifying the points at which a government is listening (or appearing to listen) and to organizing interventions at those points. Women's organizations will need to be well networked and very knowledgeable about each others' work. 2) Women's organizations will need to be able to listen to the views of their membership and convey it publicly in ways e-government recognizes as valid and important. At times they will need to organize large scale electronic interventions from their membership. 3) We will need a whole new set of skills to apply ICTs to effectively intervene in the policy process. For example, representing the views of an organization from a keyboard in a real time online "conversation". This goes beyond presenting a brief and answering questions, to being able to nimbly argue a case with opposing groups in a government sponsored online space.

Online consultations have the potential to be very competitive, with the possibility of the ground going to those with the greatest resources to participate most effectively. Not all NGOs will support equality. Women's organizations should be thinking about e-government pro-actively, so that we can engage with each other and collaborate effectively in our use of the internet to affect policy issues .

## Observations

The issues which affect women's use of the internet are expanding in context of the online opportunities for information, learning and employment. The internet is increasingly playing a part in issues of violence against women. The role of women as creators of internet content requires a gender-sensitive analysis and policies which enable women's organizations to work with and develop their online capacities. Women's organizations need to build their capacity to use the technology, to envision its possibilities and integrate it in their women's equality work.

The growth of e-government is rapidly changing the way in which women's organizations will be able to participate in social policy processes. New collaborative strategies will need to be developed to effectively take part in online consultations. The transition to e-democracy will exclude those who are not prepared to participate. It is essential for governments to support the necessary capacity building and resources for analysis of issues if women's organizations are to successfully make this transition.

The internet has an important part to play in the advancement and empowerment of women. We have great respect for women's organizations who have grasped the opportunity to learn and apply the new technologies to their work, particularly those who have done so on their own initiative. The issues of violence against women, learning and employment came through strongly in the consultation. The internet is showing new ways in which information can be shared and support networks built.



The lack of a gendered analysis in the planning and distribution of ICTs results in the downloading of social responsibility for equality, diversity, culture, and communication onto individual women and their organizations. Women's organizations continue to need to build their capacity to use the technology, to envision its possibilities and integrate it in their women's equality work.

The growth of e-government is rapidly changing the way in which women's organizations will be able to participate in social policy processes. New collaborative strategies will need to be developed to effectively take part in online consultations. The transition to e-democracy will exclude those who are not prepared to participate. Women's organizations play a vital role in society. We need to ensure that their civic participation is encouraged and maintained in the change to e-government.

### **Recommendations for further work and policy dialogue**

1. A gendered analysis of ICT policy to ensure women and women's organizations have equal access, equal participation and equal control over the new technologies .
2. The inclusion of race and culture in ICT gender analysis.
3. An ongoing analysis of the gendered impact of e-government.
4. Women's safety and privacy in public internet access sites needs to be addressed.
5. Public internet access sites should be sensitive to gender, race and disability issues.
6. There is a need to further address the lack of French online.
7. The need to support and encourage cultural diversity online.
8. Web sites need to make a best effort to embrace the current WC3 Accessibility Guidelines, to ensure the inclusion of those with disabilities.
9. There should be an analysis of the effects of the distribution of pornography online, with particular emphasis on the "push" of the materials (e.g. arriving as email spam).
10. There must be initiatives to overcome the gendered digital divide.
11. A strategy to increase the online capacity of women's organizations should be developed. Mentoring and peer to peer support systems should be central features to gain experience in using internet applications, and create learning-centred women's equality content.
12. Resources should be made available for new and creative initiatives which explore the possibilities of communications technologies and their potential use for women's equality.
13. Funders of women's NGOs should examine how they can encourage project plans which use ICTs enhance the work of the fundees, wherever appropriate.
14. The herstory and print/graphic/audio resources created by women's equality organizations over the past 30+ years need to be digitized and made accessible online in forms which are conducive to knowledge construction.
15. Women's equality seeking organizations must be specifically included in all ICT related government policies and programs.
16. A gendered analysis of the effects of telehealth.
17. A gendered analysis of the effects of ICTs on working from home.
18. A gendered analysis of the effects of ICTs on the migration of work.
19. Attention to the "third" shift, how women are using the internet for education.
20. Pay attention to the voices of women online. Their issues reflect those that we know and may well show us new and emerging issues.

21. Recognize and support the women champions/leaders in the community who can organize and build momentum for the integration of ICTs with women's equality work.
22. Encourage women's electronic networks and develop ways to support online women's community building.
23. Encourage governments to work with women's organizations to find ways to welcome women to their portals, enable women to easily find appropriate and relevant information, and promote the visibility of women's equality issues.
24. Examine and act on the effects of the internet on the global exploitation of women and girls.
25. We need to use the internet to support women subjected to violence, support networking and act in solidarity to stop the violence.
26. We must expand our understanding of how the internet is being used for hatred and violence against women, and develop ways to prevent the violence.
27. Ensure that ICT policies and programs do not increase already existing inequalities
28. NGOs need to have the resources for in service training of their staff and boards in the uses of ICTs in their work.
29. Women's organizations need to be preparing to participate in e-government, demonstrating their importance to a healthy civil society.

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