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**Women’s Communications Strategies
Utilizing ICTs and Strategic Alliances Worldwide**

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I. Women's Communications Strategies **Utilizing ICTs and Strategic Alliances Worldwide**

In the past, the informal, but often very effective ways in which NGOs around the world have maintained contact with each other have been seen as poor alternatives to the use of the much larger and so-called more "effective" official channels of communication, e.g. the mass media, government machineries, multi-national corporations and international agencies. But this is proving to be an assumption that could bear more critical analysis. For instance, women's NGO alternative media networks share an ideology and a set of values that have provided the "glue" to the global women's movement. They have sustained and allowed the women's movement to grow in a variety of shapes and forms that constantly change, break into new groups, dissolve and reform in an organic flow of movement completely unfamiliar in the world of bureaucracies, changing governments and commercial ventures.

These last 25 years have seen a major political restructuring of institutions worldwide, both governmental and non-governmental, the latter increasingly being referred to as Civil Society. This includes the proliferation of NGOs, particularly in developing countries of the Global South, their expanded role in the delivery of services previously considered the domain of government, and their corresponding clout in the political arena. The strength and vitality of new movements, including the women's movement, have brought new issues and perspectives into the global arena, and are beginning to prompt a shift in development paradigms.

Future information and communication strategies need to be multi-faceted and all-inclusive. Struggling channels need to be strengthened. Successful channels need to be evaluated and where possible expanded to reach others. The world of print materials is in many ways falling behind in this new age of modern technologies and tools. We can get breaking news around the world in seconds, but in-depth, substantive materials that support the advocacy and education efforts of women are becoming more and more difficult to find. This is usually because such materials take far more research and effort on the part of groups and individuals, and they seem often to be far less visible.

New information technologies include electronic networking, web databases and information centres, fax broadcasting, video conferencing, web-radio broadcasting, web-TV, CD-ROMs, and more. The importance of these new information and communication technologies is at the core of a global democratic development and of a global women's movement. New global knowledge systems change international development relations in countless ways. In making more strategic use of various media, international development NGOs, and specifically women and development NGOs, are able to share in the creation of alternative sources and clearing-houses of knowledge and information on development that reach out to a greatly expanded pool of individuals and groups.

It is important that all these new tools be seen as an expansion of what has already been put in place by women's organizations worldwide, which include a wide array of communication outreach systems previously sustained by phone, print materials and snail-mail. Future strategies need to include some of the learnings from these strategies, with a focus on print materials formally sent out by mail to "multiplier" groups, who took the information and repackaged it as

radio broadcasts, newsletter inserts, the basis for group discussions and countless other dissemination techniques.

Information that is now faxed and/or e-mailed could also be focused on “multiplier” groups who would then likewise translate/adapt appropriate pieces for their region or country for use on the radio, in newsletters and journals, as content for role-plays and dramas, or as the basis for discussion groups. Using time-honoured grapevines, alternative networking can be turned to our advantage, strengthening and sustaining the most viable structures that have been built over generations.

This is where the work of groups such as IWTC and its sister information networks Isis International/Manila, Isis Internacional/ Santiago, and Isis-WICCE/Kampala have become increasingly important. For 25 years, working in collaboration with regional and national information and media networks -such as FemPress, FIRE and ALAI in Latin America, ENDA-Synfev, FemNet, WomensNet and TAMWA in Africa, Women's Features Service, DepthNews, Women and Media Network for Asia and the Pacific, Asia Pacific Media Task Force and others in Asia, CAFRA and Women's Media Watch in the Caribbean-, women's media networks have reached tens of thousands of community activists in every world region with in-depth, substantive print materials that support and empower the work of women. Supplemented with breaking news disseminated via electronic networks to core groups that have access to the Internet, print materials have played an important role that is often not sufficiently recognized.

A global communications strategy incorporating many of the features of the strategy discussed above emerged from discussions between women's information and media networks participating in the first Preparatory Committee (PrepCom I-March 1999) for the Beijing Plus Five Special Session in 2000. These groups formed what is now known as the WomenAction¹ Coalition and, in close collaboration with WomenWatch –the UN web-site consortium for and about UN gender events and activities- worked solidly to implement a communications strategy that made it possible for women community activists in every world region to participate more fully in the Beijing Plus Five review and appraisal process.

A major focus of the WomenAction strategy was the training of women from every world region, so that they could undertake the construction and maintenance of regional web-sites that contained information on: a) country and regional NGO alternative reports; b) NGO initiatives and information around the Beijing Plus Five process; c) NGO access and participation in UN meetings in general and the Special Session on Beijing Plus Five specifically; and d) the monitoring and reviewing of specific actions being taken to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

In conjunction with the setting up of regional websites, a global web-site was also constructed. Entitled WomenAction 2000, the global web-site was "mirrored" in each region, making available regionally and globally the latest information on planning and preparations for the Beijing Plus Five Special Session.

At the time of the June 2000 UN Special Session, WomenAction 2000 undertook an impressive array of media activities that not only kept participants informed on each day's

progress and activities, but also provided the means by which they could share this information with their colleagues at home and with mainstream media worldwide. Activities undertaken included web radio broadcasts and web TV interviews; two daily tabloid newspapers; an Internet café; daily streaming of UN meetings via computer feed from web sites; and hands-on training/sharing on coverage of a UN meeting with an international team of women journalists.

WomenAction 2000 was and is an amazing example of what is possible when women's networks join together in the planning and implementation of a structured and collaborative information-gathering, -sharing and -dissemination process.

The world of women's NGOs is in fact a world of networks in which there are many leaders but no one person or group who does everything. Working in this way allows for: 1) Autonomy of organizations yet at the same time the potential for collective strength; 2) A more natural emergence of the unique strength of each group within the network; 3) A non-hierarchical, participatory and more egalitarian sharing of skills and strategies; 4) A greater responsiveness to change, since when a network no longer serves the needs of the group, it dissolves itself, or transforms into another form.

The battle for the minds and hearts of people everywhere is an on-going one, with enormous amounts of money dedicated to taking control of mass media networks, including radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines, cable, satellite, Internet, and telecommunications in general. For we women to be able to wind our way through this maze of technology and power in order to reach out to the community activists who are fighting for the empowerment of women and for gender justice at all levels, we need to be determined and imaginative with our strategies and outreach. A clear path has been forged by the work of activist women's groups and media networks over the past 25 years. We must continue to build on this framework, and work towards a day when every woman in every country of the world has access to the information and knowledge she needs, and is empowered to participate at every level of governance in her country, region and the world

II. Alternative Models of Women's Media Networks

In discussing the work of alternative women's media networks, it is important to point out that there are many models, each with its own focus and direction. In an effort to look more closely at the important roles played by each of these networks, a short list has been formulated below, with a few examples in each category to further explain the particular focus of each.

A. Alternative Journalism

With the mainstream media rarely covering the activities and initiatives of women worldwide, an alternative journalism strategy has developed, which, with some variations, aims to bring the work of women journalists to the attention of mainstream media within their own regions and the world. Prime amongst the groups involved within this are:

Women's Feature Service: WFS began in 1978 in Rome as a UNESCO-UNFPA initiative to create "women's features" with the specific purpose of impacting mainstream media. Now based in new Delhi, India, WFS is the only international women's news/features syndicate producing features and opinions on development from a gender perspective. WFS has writers from 40 countries and media clients all over the world. Website: <http://www.wfsnews.org/>

FemNet: Established in Nairobi, Kenya in 1988, FemNet aims to strengthen the role and contribution of African NGOs concerned with women's development. Among the programmes undertaken by FemNet are: (i) The Gender-Responsive Planning Project, which has created a strong team of 30 trainers since 1990 with a view to replicating the training in the rest of the African Region. Over 2000 policy-makers, planners, researchers, creative writers, media personnel, etc, have been gender sensitized. (ii) *FEMNET News* which enhances networking and inter-NGO collaboration. This publication disseminates up-to-date information on the achievements of and problems faced by African Women at all levels. It is published alongside *Our Rights*, which gives information on post-Beijing activities using a thematic approach for each issue. Website: <http://www.africaonline.co.ke/femnet/>

FemPress: Established first in Mexico in 1981 and then relocated to Santiago, Chile, Fempress was a simple but highly effective idea that brought news and commentary on women's activities, issues and concerns to the attention of both alternative and mainstream media across Latin America. With a woman journalist in every Latin American country reporting each month on major breaking news in each country, the Fempress magazine became a regional channel for the women's movement. National news-papers and magazines paid to use the articles and news items in each monthly issue, so disseminating the information even further. The Fempress website site includes issues of the monthly magazine "Fempress Mujer", Special Editions that focus on one particular issue area, a data base of articles, and a manual for journalists. For 20 years Fempress raised the bar on women's concerns and was the flagship of the vibrant Latin American feminist movement. Sadly, Fempress closed its doors in 2001. Website: <http://www.fempress.org>

B. Alternative Networks of Information Collecting and Sharing

This broad group of networks includes those that have been at the forefront in the use of ICTs as tools for the empowering of women worldwide. With a clear focus on women and development activities that cover the gamut of issues and concerns faced by women worldwide, these networks have worked to find the information that women have requested and then to disseminate it as widely and yet precisely as possible. Among these groups are:

fem'LINKpacific: Media Initiatives for Women: Established in 2001 as a response to the lack of women-centered stories in the mainstream media, fem'LINK is a stand-alone women's NGO that works specifically to ensure that women's voices are heard. As an activist network, fem'LINK has initiated many activities that reach out to the community at large, including peace vigils, the documenting of women's stories by video and audio tape, and the sending out of regular electronic bulletins on women's activities and issues across the Pacific and the world.

Isis International/Manila: Begun in Rome in 1974, Isis International is now based in Manila, Philippines. A feminist NGO dedicated to women's information and communication needs, Isis International documents ideas and visions; creates channels to communicate; collects and moves information; networks and builds links. Isis' focus is on the advancing of women's rights, leadership and empowerment in Asia and the Pacific. **Website:** <http://www.isiswomen.org/>

International Women's Tribune Centre: IWTC began as a response to requests for information from many of the 6000+ women who participated in the first NGO forum known as the International Women's Year Tribune, in Mexico City, 1975. It's work is grounded on the premise that access to information and the ability to communicate are basic to the process of women's empowerment, to women's ability to redefining development paradigms, to women's participation in the public policy arena and to the building of democratic societies. IWTC's work is focused in five programme areas: (1) Tackling poverty, building strong communities: women using ICTs for basic needs; (2) Using global policy for transformative action; (3) Human rights, human security, women in the peace-building process; (4) Information, networking, capacity-building and knowledge-sharing; (5) Women, Ink. marketing and dissemination of women and development publications. **Website:** <http://www.iwtc.org>

Global Sisterhood Network: Founded in 1966. GSN monitors electronic and print media for developments in agriculture, economics, employment, environment, health, law, militarism, politics, technology, trade and science which have a direct impact on the realities of women's lives. GSN provides regularly updated information including critical comment and displays of newspaper and journal articles that reinforce patriarchy/misogyny but which have attracted sparse attention and/or comment as the world moves closer and closer to undemocracy. **Website:** <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~globalsn/>

Women'sNet aims to empower South African women to use information and communications technologies (ICTs) towards advancing women's equality. It is a dynamic source of locally generated information and discussion on gender issues. One of the important features of Womensnet dissemination strategy is a regular electronic bulletin that is sent out to publicize new information placed on their website. A simple but highly effective technique. **Website:** <http://www.womensnet.org.za/>

C. Alternative Networks for ICT Training and Development

Networks in this group are those that focus their efforts on ICT capacity building amongst women and women's groups worldwide. The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Network Support Programme (APC/WNSP) has taken the lead in this work, undertaking training of women in all world regions, and most spectacularly at the Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Beijing 1995, where hundreds of women were trained over the 3 week period.

APC/WNSP: The mission of the Women's Networking Support Programme is to promote gender equity in the design, implementation, and use of information and communication

technologies - with special focus on inequities based on women's social or ethnic background - through the provision of research, training, information, and support activities in the field of ICT policy, skills-sharing in the access and use of ICT, and women's network-building. The APC Women's Programme team consists of women from more than 20 countries from North, South, East and West. They are women, groups and organizations working in the field of gender and ICT, who also actively support women's networking. Origins of programmes go back to 1993. **Website:** http://www.apcwomen.org/eng_index.html

D. Alternative Networks of information exchange and resource bases

Some networks have undertaken the mammoth task of collecting, documenting, organizing, archiving and disseminating information related to gender issues and concerns. Amongst these are:

International Archives of the Women's Movement (IIAV): Based in Amsterdam, IIAV is the source, the intermediary and the supplier of information and documentation for all those who occupy themselves with the position of women, whether it concerns books, periodicals, data, addresses, archives, visual materials, current or historical, national or international. Their programmes include the digital information centre, and mapping the world, an online data base of women's resource and information centres available worldwide. **Website:** <http://www.iiav.nl>

Women's Infoteka, a women's information and documentation centre founded in Zagreb in December 1992. The centre is a first of its kind in Croatia and Eastern Europe, with many of its activities and research databases conducted online. Basic activities include collecting and disseminating data and information; a lending service library; book and magazine publishing. **Website:** <http://www.zinfo.hr/engleski/news.htm>

E. Women's Groups and Organizations that Utilize Media as Part of their Network Outreach.

Networks that must be counted amongst the most creative utilizers of ICTs in extending the outreach and impact of their activities are those that are often forgotten because they are multi-faceted organizations with structured programmes on the ground. Yet many of them have been on the forefront in the developing of communication strategies that focus on a specific issue-area and/or group of individuals. Amongst these are:

Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL): CWGL'S programmes promote women's human rights, the leadership of women and the advancement of feminist perspectives in policy-making processes in local, national and international arenas. In recent years, CWGL has increasingly utilized electronic bulletins, action alerts and the worldwide web as major channels for reaching women's human rights activists in every world region. **Website:** <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/>

National Council for Research on Women (NCRW): Founded in 1981, NCRW is a working alliance of 92 women's research and policy centers, with more than 3,000 affiliates

and a network of over 200 international centers. NCRW's mission is to enhance the connections among research, policy analysis, advocacy, and innovative programming on behalf of women and girls, and they do this through the use of online data bases, electronic bulletins, and their website . Website: <http://www.ncrw.org>

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID): Founded in 1982, AWID's mission is to connect, inform and mobilize people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's goal is to cause policy, institutional and individual change that will improve the lives of women and girls everywhere. Their use of the world wide web and regular electronic bulletins has grown substantially in recent years, with a series of weekly bulletins focused on women and development jobs, issues, articles and resources that reaches tens of thousands. Website: <http://www.awid.org>

World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA): With a membership of 25 million women and girls in over 100 countries through 94 affiliated, autonomous national YWCAs, the World YWCA exemplifies the more-established women's organizations that were founded as social justice groups at the turn of the 19th century. Because of their long history however, these groups are often passed over when lists are made of women and development networks promoting the full and equal participation of women at all levels of society. The World YWCA has, in recent years, been utilizing ICTs as a way of linking its far-flung membership, and is now forging ahead in partnership with IWTC in the development of CD-ROMs that use local language and audio tracks to carry information on such topics as HIV-AIDS to women with minimal literacy skills in Africa. **Website:** <http://www.worldywca.org>

F. Alternative ICT-Based Networks that are Issue-Specific.

Some women and development issue networks have chosen to put all their efforts into web-based activities that stand alone. Amongst these are:

WHRnet: Founded in 1997 following an international women's human rights meeting in Zambia, WHRnet is a network of women's human rights organizations that seeks the effective utilization of all available information and communication technologies (ICTs) toward the advancement of women's human rights. In many respects, WHRnet has become the search engine of the global women's human rights movement, linking people to a wide range of groups, networks, concerns and resources through a cleverly designed mapping process and the intelligent use of a variety of web tools.

Website: <http://www.whrnet.org>

Peacewomen is a project that was inspired by both the process that led to the Security Council debating and passing Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and by the need to have an online space dedicated to women and peace activities in general. Facilitated by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), *Peacewomen* also provides a major online vehicle for the activities of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security and for the activities of all women activists working for peace at the

local, national, regional, sub-regional and international levels.

Website: <http://www.peacewomen.org>

G. Women's Information Networks Utilizing Web Radio and TV/Video Broadcasting

Often the forgotten technologies amongst ICTs, radio and TV/video are being utilized extensively by women in the dissemination of vital development and social justice information to women and gender-activists worldwide. Radio and TV are probably the most used and acceptable of the information and communication technologies, particularly when they feature local languages and people, and their expansion into online venues has exponentially advanced their outreach and effectiveness. Amongst the gender networks currently utilizing web radio and TV are:

Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE): Based in Costa Rica, FIRE is the first women's internet radio. Beginning as a shortwave radio broadcaster and later expanding to the web, FIRE covers women's conferences, demonstrations, events and activities with interviews of key activists, coverage of often-neglected critical areas of concerns and a focus on issues that matter to women worldwide. Spanish, French and English.

Website: <http://www.fire.or.cr/indexeng.htm>

Les Penelopes: Based in Paris, this global information service on feminist activities features a website covering a wide range of initiatives and activities being undertaken in every world region. Functioning in French, Spanish and English, this group of media women also videos activists at major events and broadcasts the interviews and actions via the web. On many occasions, the videos have been downloaded by mainstream media and broadcast over TV.

Website: <http://www.penelopes.org/Anglais/>

III RECOMMENDATIONS

In the years leading up to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, women and media activists undertook a range of initiatives to promote and ensure that a focus on women's equal access to all areas and levels of the media make its way into the Beijing Platform for Action. Amongst these initiatives were the holding of women and media conferences in Bangkok (1993), and with UNESCO in Toronto (1995). Out of these two meetings alone came a long list of recommendations and actions that focused on the importance of media and the new information communication technologies in the advancement and empowerment of women worldwide.

Many of these recommendations did in fact make it into the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and these now stand as some of the most far-reaching actions laid out in that document. In fact, the UN has garnered much praise for its almost visionary look at new ICTs, way before they were widely discussed in other venues!

Given that these recommendations are still largely ignored, some have been incorporated into the list below. Added to these are recommendations from more recent initiatives, e.g. in the area of women, peace and security, that are directly related to the increased use of ICTs for the advancement and empowerment of women.

Recommendations include:

From the Beijing Platform for Action: Section J:

1. Encourage and recognize women's media networks, including electronic networks and other new technologies of communication, as a means for the dissemination of information and the exchange of views, including at the international level, and support women's groups active in all media work and systems of communication to that end;
2. Encourage the development of educational and training programmes for women in order to produce information for the mass media, including funding of experimental efforts, and the use of new technologies of communication, cybernetics space and satellite, whether public or private;
3. Encourage the use of communication systems, including new technologies, as a means of strengthening women's participation in democratic processes;
4. Train women to make greater use of information technology for communication and the media, at local, national, regional and international level;
5. Create networks among and develop information programmes for and with NGOs, women's organizations and professional media organizations in order to recognize the specific needs of women in the media, and facilitate the increased participation of women in communication, in particular at the international level, in support of South-South and North-South dialogue among and between these organizations, inter alia, to promote the human rights of women and equality between men and women.

From the UN Secretary General's Report on Women, Peace and Security, October 2002.

1. Support a greater focus on the access to information and promotion of women to local sources of information on the impact of armed conflict, and the impact of interventions – peace-keeping, peace-building, humanitarian operations, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, and reconstruction – on women and girls, and on the roles and contributions of women and girls in conflict situations, including through the establishment of regular contacts with women's groups and networks.
2. Increase access to information from women's groups and networks on indicators of impending conflict as a means to ensure effective gender-sensitive early warning mechanisms.

3. Consult with civil society, including local women's groups and networks, to ensure collection of information from all stake-holders and attention to the specific needs, concerns and experiences of women and girls in the implementation of peacekeeping operations.

ENDNOTES

¹ The WomenAction Coalition initially included the following women's information and media groups. (More groups have since joined).

- APC/Women's Network Support Programme (N. America, Europe, Africa, L. America, Asia) including
 - Greenet UK/Europe
 - The Web/Canada
 - ENDA/SynfevSenegal,
 - FemNet/Kenya,
 - WomensNet/South Africa,
 - ALAI/Ecuador.
- International Women's Tribune Centre
- IIAV/Knowledge Sharing Project, The Netherlands
- Isis International, Manila, Philippines
- Isis Internacional, Santiago, Chile
- Isis-WICCE, Kampala, Uganda
- Women's Features Service, India
- Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action
- US Women Connect, Washington, DC, USA also (as collaborating partners)
- WomenWatch, including UNIFEM, UN/DAW, INSTRAW and UNDP/GIDP.