



# Networking for women or women's networking?

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Networking must not be considered as a project in itself. It must be a supporting tool for initiatives that aim to improve living conditions at other levels. In our environment in the so-called developing countries, it apparently doesn't seem relevant to talk about information infrastructure or systems, if the main problem is to guarantee the right to stay alive. The problems that a country like mine encounters maybe make communication and information technologies (ICTs) look like something that is fancy and related to developed countries.

Seen from a different point of view, it has been proved that there is a lot that you can do through the network to preserve lives. Human rights alerts and health campaigns which have produced unbelievably massive reactions, are good examples.

Networking has a crucial role to play on a day-to-day basis in women's movement as it has in any other contemporary movement. Activities such as lobbying, advocacy, organising and developing strategies are activities that could be done using networking.

Lack of resources in isolated regions; local needs that are not recognised or just unknown; local constraints that don't allow improvements; lack of equipment; absence of local expertise and models to follow; training and technical support needs; policy development or adjustment; and little pertinent or timely information: these problems are common in various degrees to different groups not just in developing countries, and they also are challenges and opportunities that women must face in the use and adoption of ICTs.

When you are involved in another type of problem than those related to electronic networking like fighting for housing rights, environmental conservation, children's rights, trafficking on women, etc. you can perfectly differentiate which are your problems and which are not. You see clearly the differences between you and the women's community you are working for, even if you suffered from the same problem in the past. Communication and information however are common issues for any problem. It is difficult for a woman who has the same needs, in terms of networking, to determine the boundary between her own needs and those of other women who expect her support.

In developing countries, ISPs not related to academic or governmental networks do not have a real support team. The ISP

is often composed of one person who is at the same time director, secretary and support person. If there are any technical support staff available, they need to understand what a specific women's group is trying to do in their day-to-day work. Needs vary from one group to another and these groups do not have to agree just because they are women. This support group or person, also needs to be receptive to women's concerns as far as the consequences of implementing new information and communication technologies are concerned and must try to find the right methodology and strategy to approach their work with easy-to-use solutions.

Which are the issues that make women's needs different from others? or make them need more attention than other groups? To begin with, there are the inequities in the design, implementation and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the policy decisions and frameworks that regulate them, which exclude women's participation and use.

To have access to technical and decision-making jobs, women need access to technical and administrative training opportunities. It is common to find a woman that could not attend a training course because she just could not leave her family for a long period of time: Why are good technical courses so rarely held in developing countries? Why are childcare facilities not provided? It is also necessary to include a proportion of women among the participants as part of the criteria of selection. Women also need "time to live" and take care of their families. Why are technical or decision-making jobs not available on a part-time basis? So, even if women are well qualified they do not automatically have access to that kind of job.

Why is it important to change this situation? Not just because "gender" issues are in fashion, or because the UN has said so, but because in world history women have shown enough courage to improve living conditions for themselves and for future generations, and to gain visibility for their activities and respect for their opinions. This courage (that has been very hard to maintain) is now recognised as the best way to guarantee the implementation and sustainability of programs. Local and national governments, international agencies, etc. recognise women's participation and intervention as a concrete factor that makes the difference between initiatives that just start and suddenly died and programs that evolve, mature and last.

Taking part in the implementation of initiatives, is not the same as being involved in planning and decision making. Culturally anchored behaviour does not allow women to be decision-makers and at the same time be accepted by the community. A concrete strategy that integrates women in technical, administrative and financial decisions must be developed. What's more, when talking about decisions, information plays a very important role. In Nueva Guinea - Nicaragua, a water supply and sanitation project (supported by the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre) developed a methodology that integrates women's concerns into

the community decision-making process in such a way that allows women to participate at other organisational levels. In some cases the local government or the international agency introduces women's ideas to the community as a "guarantee" that attention will be paid to them.

The decision-making process needs a lot of information and cultural input. When women are involved in information and communication initiatives there is much more input about community development initiatives, and this makes a significant difference not just for women. In Colnodo, like other APC members, we are working to construct a truly alternative information infrastructure for the challenges of global networking that lie ahead. Continued and further impact at a policy and decision-making level regarding the role of women in relation to ICTs is crucial to ensure the development of greater gender balance in ICT environments. At the same time, Colnodo continues to strive for productive on-line workspaces for women.

Sylvia Cadena, COLNODO. September 1997.