Book Review

Women and the Net: The Stories

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Final Jeopardy, anyone?

Q: That woman on the Internet

A: Who is Anna Kournikova?

Farfetched? No, not according to search engine Lycos that recently gave the Russian tennis star a trophy as proof of her unparalleled popularity (despite her inability to win an actual trophy in her sport) among Netizens. Lara Croft, the computer-generated version, is up there as well. A sad state of affairs for women on the Internet? Probably, but the "real" women are gaining ground.

At the dawn of a new wireless technological era that will see the triumph of the personal digital assistant (PDA) over the personal computer (PC), when the average "techie" can create another Kournikova website during a lunch break and send out another virus before dessert, the e-mail was one of the most wonderfully incomprehensible things on the planet. Ten years ago, the concept of sending inexpensive but durable messages was truly mind-boggling. Today, with third generation (3G) cellular phones that are both mobile and high-speed Internet-ready, allowing for the instant exchange of voice, data, music, photos anywhere in the world cable-free, the e-mail is a recent addition to the information technology (IT) museum.

More than five years ago when the Association of Progressive Communicators (APC) and the APC Women's Network Programme took on the ambitious endeavor of wiring the United Nations Fourth World

Conference on Women (UNWCW) in Beijing, IT was closer to science fiction.

It was ambitious because the 1995 conference was attended by more than 30,000 delegates who needed Internet access, electronic communication and information services and support and the 40 APC Women's Network Programme volunteers who were to supply all these did not enjoy the conveniences afforded by 2001 IT. The volunteers prevailed and their experiences as well as stories of other women making their mark in the new field are told in *Women in Sync*, APC's tool kit for electronic networking.

The APC believes that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are "powerful tools that can help build social networks and contribute toward progressive social change but access to these tools is not equal. Social, ethnic and gender inequalities exist and these inequities are more pronounced for women in general, and particularly for women from the South." Indeed IT is still SF especially in countries still adjusting to their most recent technological breakthrough: the land line.

Women in Sync commemorates 10 years of commitment and is the APC's contribution to the development and strengthening of practical, relevant and sustainable women's networking initiatives at the global, regional and national levels. The unique three-volume collection contains stories of women, pioneers in e-mail communication before the Internet boom and the dot com crash and of women who persevered in utilizing computer networking that built connections among women across continents for women's empowerment.

The first tool kit, *Putting Beijing Online*, summarizes the findings of the research, 'Women Working in Information and Communication Technologies (WWICT): Experiences from the APC Women's Networking Support Programme." It involved the gathering of feedback from the Beijing volunteers.

According to the responses, working on the APC women's communication project entailed sacrifices since most of the volunteers had regular day jobs. But as their comments illustrate, the experiences were both useful and empowering:

It made me more determined to stand up for myself as a woman and (showed me) how I could be part of something that was bigger, which could change people's perceptions and lives.

I think mostly it had an impact on me in my work in helping me realize what I was capable of doing and that I did have good skills. This, of course, boosted my confidence and helped me in my personal and community life. I have since branched out into being much more curious and demanding technical answers and learning, and doing more technical user support.

I have redirected myself to the online feminist community and I'm continuously seeking ways to expand feminist cyberspace by mentoring other women.

Overwhelmingly, women felt their experiences working with a group of women on a computer communications project was very significant, particularly in how it was women-led/women-defined:

The inherent bias of the ICT environment was redressed considerably by having an all-women team. That contributed towards a spirit of trust, confidence, cooperation and a feeling that we were all in it together.

It was the first time in my computing life that I had ever been able to work with women in a technical way. Always my teachers and co-workers had been men. I was delighted to work alongside so many women who knew so much more. It was significant that the women using the centre saw so many competent women.

Though bearing the abovementioned title, the toolkit does not discuss in detail the historic UNWCW. Perhaps the conference proceedings was published elsewhere and the APC assumes that the reader is well acquainted with the conference or the Beijing Platform for Action, one of the strongest and most comprehensive international agreements on women's equality. For the unfamiliar, the writer implicitly asks the reader to surf the Internet for additional information.

Putting Beijing Online does provide a conference work scenario by outlining the tasks undertaken by the APC team to deliver communication services and support to thousands of UNWCW participants. Among these

tasks are user support, information facilitation, political diplomatic action and training. Day to day difficulties are not rendered in narrative form. Without a first hand account of the tense working conditions and the frenetic pace in which the conference tasks were undertaken, the reader still gets an idea of the collective Beijing experience.

The second tool kit, *Networking for Change*, collects of five articles chronicling the history of the APC and the APC Women's Network Programme.

It opens with Karen Banks, Executive Director of GreenNet, narrating how she met the e-mail, "messages composed using special DOS-based software compressed into a bundle $1/20^{th}$ of its original size transmitted from one computer to another via a modem."

According to Banks, APC started as the collaboration between GreenNet, one of the first Internet service providers (ISPs) in the UK and counterparts at the Institute for Global Communication (IGC). The two shared electronic "conferences" or "newsgroups" materials and demonstrated that transnational electronic communications could serve international as well as domestic communities working for peace, human rights and the environment. By 1990, GreenNet and IGC along with NordNet of Sweden, Web of Canada, IBASE of Brazil, Nicarao of Nicaragua and Pegasus of Australia had founded APC.

In June 1992, the APC provided on-site computer-based communication services to the 17,500 NGO delegates who attended the NGO forum during the Earth Summit. This service was the first at a UN conference. From this endeavor, a group of women who were based at various APC member-organizations found the need to provide a similar but more coordinated service for the international women's environment and development movement.

By 1993, APC's membership had expanded to South East Asia, Africa and, Central and Eastern Europe. Two events, the Vienna Human Rights Conference (May 1993) and the Interdoc-Aspac Workshop in Kuala Lumpur (June 1993), further strengthened the case for a global networking support program for women. Later in September, the APC council approved the "Women's Network Support Programme."

Since then APC Women's Network Programme has committed itself to introducing new communications technologies to the greatest number of women possible, a problem made difficult by the fact that majority of the world's women do not have access to a telephone, and moving forward the Women and IT agenda. For additional information one can visit the APC website at www.apc.org.

The third tool kit, *Acting Locally, Connecting Globally*, contains remarkable success stories of women's networking from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Among the featured stories are that of the Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui a la Femme Entrepreneur (ASAFE), which has been assisting women entrepreneurs since its founding in 1989. ASAFE currently has 3000 members and plans to establish e-commerce for as many of its local members as possible. Francophone Africa has Famafrique, a network that aims to increase and strengthen the women's movement on the Internet. Famafrique was founded in the early 1990s by women and their organizations that decided to harness the potential of information and communication technology to advance the status of women in Francophone Africa.

Like most organizations in developing countries, Famafrique did not have ready funds for buying computers. Even if an organization did manage to secure a unit, members had little or no knowledge in computers. Despite initial difficulties, the organization set up the first virtual network and web gateway "by, for and of Francophone Africa women."

Similar stories are recounted by the Women's Net of South Africa, Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC) of the Philippines and Women's Mailing List of Indonesia, which rose out of the rubble of Soeharto's Jakarta. Women'sNet has trained more than 300 women in using the Internet and e-mail and continues to inspire women's organizations to use ICT to advance women's empowerment. Formed during a workshop organized by Isis Manila in 1998, AWORC has taken a lead in initiatives that enabled more women to access, understand and use new ICT.

The Women's Mailing List's story is probably the collection's most inspirational piece. The group began with 75 women activists who met in secret during the Indonesian dictator's final days in office. They decided to get together regularly to draw up plans of action "ensuring women's equal share of voice in the decisions made for the future of the country." Since most of the members had e-mail addresses but no money for support, a Web-based free mailing list service became the only feasible option. On July 12, 1998 the Women's Mailing List was launched with a user base of only 32. By June 2000 it had around 250 subscribers.

"Nothing is impossible when women work together," writes Marie-Helene Mottin Sylla coordinator of the Environment and Development in the World-Synergy Gender and Development (ENDA-SYNFEV) and APC-Africa-Women. This sentiment is echoed throughout *Women in Sync*.

Karen Delgadillo's "Finding One's Voice through the Internet" perhaps shows most clearly how the technology most people take for granted can touch other lives in a profound manner.

In her story, the potato farmers of Pastocalle, a town in the Andean highlands located 3,100 meters above sea level, confronted a strange plague of ants and had already given up on government assistance. Fortunately for the farmers, the community had earlier bought a computer and was able to get in touch with other farming organizations with similar problems. Through the Internet the Pastocalle farmers were able to save their crops.

Interest in the technology grew and soon the community was undergoing training to harness the tools of the Internet. The story continues. Through the same computer that was housed in the community telecentre, the boys accessed pornographic sites. Delgadillo finds out later from the girls who made the discovery that most of the girls of the community had been raped by an uncle or a male relative.

The training sessions became the venue for the women to open up about their experiences of domestic abuse and their husbands' alcoholism and a forum for mutual support and solidarity.One day, a woman came to the session with a story of how she stood up to her husband, striking back when the husband began to abandon reason. Two days after this individual triumph, the men lashed out and the telecentre was closed

down. But the author chose to see the victory in the story rather than the loss.

> In my view, the telecentre and the Internet when they were integrated into the community became tools for aiding community development. They also served as instruments to unearth deeper community problems, those that festered and were kept hidden like rape and incest. However, these tools are not in themselves the forces that finally altered the relations of power within the community. The power to transform the relations in the community comes from the women's new-found strength, their realization that it is alright to demand changes for their betterment, and the discovery of their voices by which to assert themselves.

Indeed while IT is a very potent tool in strengthening the women's network and sustaining women's initiatives at global, regional and national levels it is not the end-all. It is also not the only means of getting across. Sonia Jaffe Robbins stresses that e-mail and e-mail meetings do not substitute for face-to-face meetings, nor other media like publications.

> I found that being able to visualize a face behind an e-mail address made it easier for me to communicate, especially when I had to appeal to someone to participate in a discussion...if a face-to-face meeting cannot precede electronic networking, photographs can be digitized and uploaded to a Web page or e-mailed to participants. But as long as Web access is not universally available, resource must be allotted to hard-copy publications, or those most needing the information will be left out.

Women in Sync, according the Chat Garcia Ramilo, hopes to encourage the telling of many other women's stories. With IT in the hands of determined individuals and groups that have maximized the use of less sophisticated means of communication, the next women success stories will not be limited to the likes of Anna Kournikova. ●