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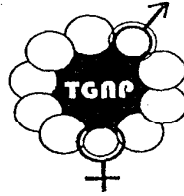

USING INTERNET FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT:

EXPERIMENTS IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

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experiments in social and cultural change

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Introducing WoN

The project Women on the Net (WoN) was set up originally by the Society for International Development with UNESCO funding. WoN aims to do several things. First, to encourage women particularly in the south and in marginal groups in the north (and Central and East Europe) to use the Internet more easily as their space in an effort to 'empower' women to use technology as a political tool. Secondly, to open up and contribute to the new culture that is being set up on the Internet from a gender perspective that is at once local and global. Thirdly, to bring together individual women and men working from different institutional bases (women NGOs, IT (information technology) networks, academe, women activists) to explore a transnational women's movement agenda in response to and shaping evolving telecommunication policies. And fourthly, to create a resource (community and support) base which could be tapped into by different women's groups in terms of analysis, knowledge and skills on navigating the Internet.

The group is made up of individuals, many with strong institutional affiliations, who have been dialoguing with one another for the last two years. The main mechanism for communication is a 'cyborg list' (Haraway 1991), (1) set up in mid-1997. The image of a 'cyborg' was chosens as it depicts a group of women that communicates through their computers in cyberspace. Whether this is a 'feminist cyborg,' or not, is still being debated with the group. But in the sense that both political, professional and personal lives are part of the list's discussions there is certainly a strongly woman-centred and gender-centred sense of identity being built on the list. The discussions on technical and political agendas are intermixed with personal and intimate histories and happenings. The frustrations of being women working in a male environment are shared along with the pleasures: four babies have been born during the group's existence. Health difficulties, managing professional and political life with children and new and old partners are part of the culture being created creating an intimacy which the solidarity act of typing into a key board in front of screen belies but which the image of cyborg embraces.

Cyborg conversations?

'Women on the Net' present the spice of what these new communication technologies offer and the tempting new ways to experience one another, suggesting a new closeness as women (with men) explore and create a cyberculture. The experience of the group indicates that Internet is a tool for creating a communicative space that when embedded in a political reality can be an empowering mechanism

for women. Women are building on their strengths --particularly networking and lobbying for women's rights-- through the Internet and that they are moving beyond that to intervene and affect powerful policy agendas on telecommunications and social and economic policies. They are creating and managing new knowledge systems, deeply conscious of the different realities of women from marginalized communities and careful not to take up cyberspeak, analytic jargon and assumptions that a wonderful new world will open at the touch of a button. They are unafraid to listen to their own doubts. They voice their need to overcome a resistance to technology while they insist that screen to screen contacts can never replace face to face. And they point out that the maleness and the elitism of the tools --the exclusivity, the language barriers, the costliness, the Western biases and the divides-- run too deep just to be overcome by more information and 'skills.' They embrace the possibilities to break down personal and public divides, to experiment in a mix of personal, political and professional and to mediate the crossing of boundaries.

Defining mediations

In order to use cyberspace the group finds it necessary to mediate several boundaries. Let us begin with the gender divide --the majority of WoN are women who welcome the interaction with the men joining them in exploring the gendered implications of the Net. Indeed the issue of men as part of the group does not arise, possibly because at the beginning almost none knew, beyond a sense given by the name and place (but then many are no longer situated in their country of origin), what people looked like in the flesh, who they 'are' just on sight. So a vital element of communication --physical attraction-- could not enter. Not knowing gender or the look of someone is a virtual robbing of some of the richness of communication. This explains perhaps the tolerance but also why some of the language WoN uses becomes personal and even poetic to help people gain a sense of who 'I am really' beyond the typing on the screen.

Perhaps the most obvious and celebrated crossed boundary is the geo-political one -- thousands of kilometers fade in chats across the screen. Just a few hours of time difference, which can be peripheral as access to terminals at all hours in homes or cybercafes, allows messages to reach the Pacific, Asia, Europe, North America, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East instantaneously with the cost of a telephone call. Something curious and wondrous. But the continual crossing of the here and now divide brings the need to create a sense of reality and place starts to creep in --at least to say what the weather is like-- to give a sense of humidity of the Zanzibari breeze, the heat of Rome summer, the deep winter snow of Toronto, the buzz of the people around the clatter of the keyboards. Certainly the cyborg list conversations express the need to embed and to root deeply virtual discussions in the political reality being fought every day. There is an attempt to anchor the happenings of the real life community to the virtual global discourse in order for the cyber communication space to have meaning.

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Even so the sense of community becomes unsettled --where is that community located? In space --which space? Whose space? Where does the Zanzibar community locate itself as people log in throughout the world to discuss kanga patterns and learn home news? Where is the fight for Chiapas happening --in Mexican jungles or on the cyber battle fields --or both-- and what does this mean? And for those who do not have a fixed physical location -- potentially all migrant women forced to move from their home to look for work-- can virtual communities exist to provide services, information, education and to build another kind of knowledge base? (see Harcourt, 1999)

Other boundaries being crossed continually in the group are those of intellectual and activist, of feminist and women centred work. Labels become fluid as people find the words to understand each other divorced from concrete ways of judging --there is no actual class room, no trade union hall, no ancestral ground to defend, no government office to lobby. These remain virtual points of reference that are imagined not actually embraced and shared. Those who would not meet with professors or high level policy makers find themselves in correspondence with them through e-mail. Papers that would never have reached an African NGO in rural Senegal are translated and sent in a few days of delivery at a scientific or intergovernmental event. Women who will never meet exchange on a daily basis their worries about the men and children in their lives. Women engrossed in their own battles for survival suddenly find groups living in other countries share the same concerns and exchange valuable strategic knowledge. Academics and activists engage in a vigorous debate that each will use in different contexts enriched by what they have exchanged.

Then there are the crossing of the personal and professional boundaries. For those able to afford and access easily in terms of time (even if squeezed between family needs) and equipment, the Internet offers a sense of being able to share your life more easily. People provide the personal in an e-mail communication --something that perhaps would never be placed in a fax or letter. There is something wonderful about this-- news of a baby born to a never met transnational group of cyber friends, breast feeding problems discussed among women isolated in rural settings, urgent messages sent by refugee Afghan women throughout the globe. But there are also the dangers of never ending conversations running into other issues, messages too quickly sent, tempers flaring, unwisely shared fears and hopes.

Less vitally but still worth noting, is the boundary of good or bad writing (beyond the issue of English as the dominating language or cyberspeak technical jargon). E-mail is producing the tendency to produce quick and ungrammatical messages sent without rereading --telegraphic in brevity and almost in code, listserv messages left unread by some. This too changes the face of communication.

In mediating these boundaries within the WoN, there is an attempt to delineate the borders and the exciting possibilities in crossing them as women open up new

political spaces. Nevertheless it seems a tiny area women are inhabiting, controlled and designed usually by others. The questions remains: are we truly connected or just scratching at the surface of a fast changing world that is evolving without our design or needs in mind? Hence the attempts by some of the group to venture into the world of decision-making and policy agenda setting on telecommunications and other areas affecting access and use of the Net and Web. In this some brave women are charting the ground into which women are yet to venture as a critical mass. For now, these seem power battles which women are not well equipped to fight. The world of Microsoft, high finance and telecommunications business are not the spaces in which women or those pushing for an alternative agenda easily find a voice.

A sense of identity?

To return to the metaphor of the cyborg. One question which continues to be asked within the group is what, if any, sense of identity for women in cyberculture can be created? Can we have a fluid and multicultural communication space which is safe, one from which our visions can be drawn and eventually enacted in reality? What do women from all these countries and backgrounds have in common beyond the sense that the Internet could be a useful tool for empowering them in their local battles? In order to create a critical mass it is important to find a sense of identity. Perhaps one resides in the metaphor of a feminist cyborg --but for many women -- this is too removed from their reality and belongs to a sophisticated cyberspeak being produced mainly in Northern feminist (post-modernist) circles. Perhaps it better resides in the sense of political activism that is using the Internet as a global tool for local political needs.

Local and global encounters

The experience of WoN suggests that women and men involved are seeking not to be trapped in the excitement and hype around the cyberworld but are trying to map out virtual reality as closely as possible to their place-based politics. And in this resides some sort of identity in cyberculture.

From which places are the WoN speaking? NGOs, resource centres, academic institutes, UN agencies and homes based in rural and urban Europe, Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East, North America, Latin America and Africa and those intellectual and visionary migrants on the move. An eclectic mix who are involved in women's issues in different ways --as migrant and indigenous rights activists, policy lobbyists, women in development researchers, journalists, technical communication experts, ecologists, anthropologists and policy makers. All brought together because from their local position --as they try to fight for change, build their political analysis and skills, sort through the maze of information, the types of knowledge required and the potential allies --they have recognized the power of the Internet. The Internet has become an increasingly accessible learning space, a place to network, and to gain power and strength. They introduce their local needs into the global space of the Internet in order to help them with their local battles but also to understand the

process and transform cyberspace so that it reflects theirs and other women's needs in the creation of a 'glocality.' The notion of place is inherent in these women's lives and struggles.

We can define the meaning of place and gender in relation to cyberculture on several levels. Due to the gender bias of social and cultural processes, women's bodies are their first environment or place. It is the female body in all cultures that defines women as the other, as the reproductive being, the mother, as the sexually desired. It is the body through which women are primarily to mediate all gendered interactions including those from which they defend and evolve their identity. The cyborg woman has evolved an identity that on the one hand breaks this notion of biological body by extending communication of self through the sexless machine of the computer and modem. And on the other hand, cyberculture offers the possibility to celebrate and share the feminine space with other women from many diverse situations, giving credibility to women's bodily experience through an oral medium which encourages a more open personal discourse --if the safe space can be nurtured. It also, in its darkest interface allows for manipulation and misuse of women's bodies --another area for women to fight against in their struggle against bodily violence.

A second level is the domestic space of the home that for many women still defines their primary social and cultural identity and lived domain. The home and immediate community are the safe places for women to express themselves, and it is here, potentially, that the possibilities of the terminals in the home, the personal and political exchanges this potentially facilitates, could change women's political lives. Women, calling on long traditions of flexibility between reproductive and productive work, could weave new political spaces while maintaining their reproductive work space. Already Northern women are increasingly working from home raising on the one side the problems of exploitative work conditions but on the other the potential of new feminine spaces from which to launch plans for change.

The third place is that outside the home --the political and social public place-- the male dominated domain to which some women still have no access, and where many women find themselves silenced and few women rule. The women's movement for many years now has been creating diverse avenues for entry into that space, even if marginal to the pulse of political power. The cyberculture now being created in this public domain is a new type of political space that has power and impact in the public domain. Its current accessibility for women suggests a possible opening that could promote women's public political battles and link these three different levels of place: the body; the home; and political and social public space. The critical point is that women have to be ensuring that they are part of the design and crafting of the cyberculture in order to produce new types of gendered communication spaces throughout the Internet. They need to craft a process where their voices are heard in ways that can mediate through and change radically the public political domain.

The collective vision of the WoN is to use the potentially globally accessible tool of the Internet to open out the corridors of power and create a new politics emanating from place. Such a place based strategy is being mapped out and defined by women based on their sense of the feminine, their every day life realities, their current questionings of hierarchies, resistance to male domination and confidence in their own creativity.

Bibliography

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(1) The term 'cyborg' has been borrowed loosely from Donna Haraway which she describes as:

a hybrid creature, composed of organisms and machine... appropriate to the late twentieth century... made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen 'high-technological' guise as information systems... and reproductive systems... communication systems,... and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses (Haraway, 1991, p. 1).