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On-Line ... From Asia To The World - Asian Women's NGOs Make Use Of New Communication Technologies

By

Marvic Cabrera-Balleza
Vijaya is a reproductive health educator based in Bangalore, India. Her active involvement in the women's movement dates back to the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975. Fully aware of the polemics against the issue she advocates, Vijaya arms herself with as much information as she can gather on the subject. But time and material resources are existential factors she has to contend with. Neither she nor her organization has the financial capability to send her to all of the important conferences that tackle the sensitive issue of reproductive health. Besides, international travel would take so much of her time which she would rather spend in visiting villages to conduct training. Though she subscribe to a number of publications which are likewise very helpful, the postal system is not that efficient and by the time the print material gets to her, some articles are already outdated. On the average, surface mail from most Asian countries to India takes about a month. And postage rates are not really cheap so publishers are forced to pass this burden on to the subscribers.

The recently concluded Fourth World Conference on Women is one conference that Vijaya kept track on. She considers it a milestone because the issue of reproductive health has been identified a critical area of concern. Clearly, a big leap from the Nairobi Conference in 1985 where it was not even on the agenda.

Since the last quarter of 1992, Vijaya has been reading all conference materials she can lay her hands on. The process of linking with other groups involved in reproductive health, especially those outside of India became very frustrating for her. Until her organization subscribed to electronic mail in mid-1993. However, Vijaya's interest in electronic communications networking did not flourish until in 1993 when the Asia-Pacific Regional Symposium of NGOs was held in Manila in November 1993.

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In that symposium, which was the first NGO preparatory meeting for the Beijing Conference, a caucus of six regional women's media and communications network led by Isis International - Manila combined forces and pooled their resources to form the Standing Committee on Information, Documentation and Communication (IDC). This group provided news and updates on the Symposium to the international community through the production of daily electronic newsletters accessible in 132 countries through APC and partner networks. As expected, Vijaya opened the electronic mail daily without fail.

Vijaya's case illustrates just one of the many uses of computer-based communications for women's NGOs in the region.

Asian women's groups and the new communication technologies:

In February 1994, UBINIG, a women's NGO based in Dhaka, Bangladesh hosted the international conference People's Perspective on Population. Proceedings of this conference were made available to users of international networks using AsiaLink. This initiative was extremely effective in encouraging participation in the preparatory processes that led to the Cairo Conference on Population and Development.

In Thailand, a group of NGOs, a number of them women's organizations, formed a cooperative to share an e-mail box with assistance from the Computer Communication Access for NGOs. The groups are now using bulletin board systems supporting Thai and English for their communication needs within Thailand.

The archipelagic nature of the Philippines aggravates the problem of communication. Because of this and the ubiquitous problem of postal system inefficiency, courier services proliferate in the country. In a country that is made up of over 7,000 islands, visited by an average number of 21 typhoons a year, and confronted by other natural and man-made disasters such as volcanic eruptions and flashfloods, traveling even only domestically is not that easy. The fax machine although a big improvement from the days of the telex has also been in a sense limiting because of the exorbitant rates being charged by the national telephone company. But thanks to the establishment of an E-mail Center that makes use of a single dial-up computer connection a couple of years ago. If there is one group that has really benefited from this development, it is the women's network. To date, there are already about 12 national women's groups active in exchanging information on-line and have been continually motivated by being able to interconnect with each other.

Isis International, the group that I represent, is an international women's NGO that specializes in information-sharing and communications networking. Since 1974, Isis has been working to promote women's empowerment through information, communication networking and skills sharing.
With its international nature, it has been necessary for Isis to keep in touch with many NGOs and other international development institutions from all over the world. To add to this, the organization also has to maintain close coordination with two other Isis offices in Chile and Uganda. To be able to carry out its mandate, Isis has to ensure that it keeps pace with developments in communication technologies that are effective and yet affordable.

At present, Isis makes use of computer-based communications that include e-mail, bulletin board systems, computer conferencing and networking and on-line data bases. From its base in Manila, Isis' Communications Program has been sending the monthly Women Envision through e-mail to its subscribers around the world. Moreover, it has actively used the e-mail in establishing a network of women's resource centers in the region. In February 1994, when Isis co-organized the Women Empowering Communications Conference also here in Bangkok, it conducted an e-mail workshop attended by a number of women's groups from all over the world.

For Isis, as well as for most NGOs in the Asian region, new communication technologies provide practical tools that help in improving the way we share and exchange information, network, conduct research and support advocacies and campaigns.

The Information superhighway in Beijing

The use of new communication technologies, specifically computer networks has been instrumental in facilitating the participation of women NGOs in the preparatory processes as well as the actual World Conference on Women. The instruments used by these groups vary from state of the art Internet publishing tools to the simplest electronic mail connection. While some women's groups with Internet access were able to set up their own web-page on the WorldWideWeb, some groups shared on-line information by creating dial-up computer links with very basic technology and minimal resources.

Other applications of electronic communications networking at the WCW include:

* posting of reports by NGO Forum workshop organizers which enabled women and men who were not in Beijing to have a register of events
* posting of news articles by media groups and individual journalists to their respective agencies and papers in their respective countries
* providing on-line information to national radio and television stations for their local productions
* some women's groups disseminated information to their local base for further distribution using other means of communication
* women's groups at home were able to lobby their governmental delegations with messages sent via their counterparts in Beijing.

Inspired by their experience in Beijing, women's groups have vowed to integrate the use of new communication technologies in their day-to-day life -- in the work place and wherever and whenever it is possible, even at home.
What made Asian women's NGOs join the ride to the information highway? Following are the advantages they cited:

* saves time and resources -- letters do not have to be printed on paper, placed in envelopes and transported over long distances to their destination
* compared to air mail and fax, it is fast and relatively cheaper
* messages can be sent to one or several recipients (meaning to individuals, institutions or to the public) simultaneously at little or no extra cost
* messages can be exchanged at all hours regardless of time zone differences
* allows the user to re-use text-based material without retyping it to the computer
* no separate telephone line is necessary -- it doesn't need to be reserved for computer communications purposes, meaning, it is only busy when it is actually used by the modem
* no separate computer is necessary -- a computer being used for e-mail may also be used for other softwares
* there is no need for a very sophisticated computer -- even relatively slow and old computers may be used
* offers the possibility of sending or receiving faxes or telexes
* can be used to search on-line databases on computers worldwide
* has multi-media capabilities, making it possible to transmit data, audio and video material

Although computer communication is becoming more and more popular worldwide, in some developing countries, the necessary equipment is not always affordable or available. Moreover, telecommunication facilities needed to support e-mail are inadequate in some countries.

Women's groups interviewed for this paper raised the following limitations of computer communications:

* computer technology may be culturally alien, causing "techno-phobia" or a reluctance to use computers;
* computer communications can end up excluding those who are not "computer literate''
* it takes longer to learn to use this technology than paper mail, telephones, or fax machines;
* training in local languages have yet to be developed or become widely available;
* computer softwares are mostly in English and are written in a very technical manner;
* the basic requirements for computer communications such as the computer, modem and telephone are relatively expensive, especially for some groups based in the South

Despite these limitations, computer and communication technology are evolving at an extremely rapid pace. It remains an undeniable fact that in the long-run, the gains still outweigh the limitations.

Communication technology has enabled thousands of women to communicate interactively not only in Asia but around the world. Indeed, it has increased their capacity to intervene in public spheres and made it possible for them to create parallel events without the limits of time and space.