Women's information centres and networks: a global perspective

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Informal social networks and togetherness among women have been approved forms of organization since time immemorial. Women everywhere have formed themselves formally and informally into networks to demand services and promote networks of survival and mutual help to accomplish their reproductive and productive roles. Since the International Women's Year (1975), the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) in Mexico City, and the four World Conferences on Women, an enormous increase has been observed in the number and types of women's groups and organizations around the world, and a complex of international, regional, national and local networks of individuals and organizations has emerged. At the same time the recognition of women's issues has grown, both nationally and worldwide, and so has the need for comprehensive and reliable data on women and their concerns. Information centres have been established to try to meet this need. Although information centres and networks superficially appear to be very different, the theory of networking outlined below indeed identifies them as being part of the same general trend.

The nature of networks

Networking has been regarded as an important communication strategy that mobilizes, decentralizes, and disseminates information and thereby can redistribute power. It takes place between independent individuals and individuals affiliated to diverse formal and informal organizations. Networking can be political, personal, or professional, motivated by the desire for information, solidarity, or a desire to meet other personal, ethical or professional goals. An important contribution of a network is its capacity to support local struggles by linking them with wider issues of regional, national or international organizations. The goal of networking is to have a two-way flow of communication (WINAP 1988). Network NGOs are formal associations or informal groups of grassroots and/or support NGOs which meet periodically to discuss particular issues. They act as a forum to share micro-level experiences, carry out joint development endeavours and to engage in lobbying and advocacy (Murthy and Singh 1996). Networking takes place at local, national, sub-regional, regional and international levels, and can be organized around various purposes and audiences, including goals of information dissemination, empowerment and advocacy.

Networks focusing on women and gender can comprise women's information networks, women's presses, or even worldwide networks of video makers. These networks create alternative communication channels that articulate other visions of women and act as a forum of power that challenges the stereotypical representations of women as passive and silent. Global women's conferences are good events for starting new or expanding on existing networks because they promote contact among participants as well as disseminating names and addresses of women, facilitating wider networking. Anne Walker of the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) argued that 'the world is a world of networks in which there are many leaders but no one person or group who does everything. Each network provides a channel for the collection, dissemination and generation of information without any source being dependent on one source only' (1998).

The theory of networking

Networking itself has first to be defined. Nelson and Farrington (1994) argue that while networking embraces many kinds of activity, criteria should be agreed which distinguish it from other kinds of contacts between individuals or institutions. A network is not, for example, a mailing list or an education programme. Nelson and Farrington state that networking or, as they call it, information exchange networking is the 'collaborative process of information exchange, around a central theme, carried out by actively interested parties'. It may be conducted in written or audiovisual modes. UNESCO defines an information network as 'an arrangement or an administrative structure that links a group of individuals or organizations who have agreed to work together and/or share resources. Information networking entails the sharing of resources so that the information needs of both actual and potential users of information, from the local to the national level, of all network participants are met' (1985). McMurdo (1996) finds that networking can be thought of in two ways: either as a technical process for which methods of operation are relatively straightforward, or conversely as an entirely non-technical process involving 'higher-level interpersonal, social and organizational interactions, and this aspect also has a distinct literature'. Nelson and Farrington distinguish between those organizations which exist primarily for the purpose of networking, which can be termed information exchange networks (IENs), and those for which networking is a subsidiary activity, which are termed organizations with a network function (ONFs).

These definitions of networks and networking are diverse because they come from diverse individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of education, discipline, class and nationality. For example, those from agricultural research backgrounds, such as Nelson and Farrington, may not give enough emphasis to the advocacy and empowerment function of networks recognized by those in the women's movement. On the other hand, those in the women's movement may not have full awareness of the established agricultural literature on networks and the effectiveness of networks as an organizational form in agricultural development. In an effort to bridge these gaps, the authors would like to propose the following definition of a network:

Any group of individuals or organizations who, on a voluntary basis or for professional reasons, organize themselves to share knowledge and other resources, exchange information or undertake joint activities around specific interest areas so that they empower themselves, individually or collectively, reach their social objectives or meet their professional goals.

Advantages of networking

Networks are seen as important tools for development. Nelson and Farrington (1994) argue that they are built on the principles incorporated in the informal networks that have long existed in rural societies, but it is possible to take exception to this and argue that networks are derived, in principle, from human interaction in general terms, irrespective of whether it takes place in a rural or urban setting. Networking is an important political tool for women. ABANTU for Development (1994) argues that it is often one of the few tools that are freely accessible to women who may be marginalized by the processes and decisions that shape their lives. Women are able to meet within an informal network in the domestic sphere and exchange information, news and personal stories, and give support and encouragement to each other. This networking takes place everyday, all over the world, in homes, marketplaces,

and wherever women regularly congregate. The formalization of this progress is something that women's groups and associations have identified as a distinct strategy in its own right, to enable women to pool resources, mobilize support, and provide mutual encouragement. Nelson and Farrington identify clearly the advantages of networks:

- they promote the exchange of ideas and information around a central theme between individuals and groups who would not otherwise regularly communicate with each other;
- they focus the efforts of an often dispersed and hard-pressed community;
- they combine simplicity of operation with structural flexibility in order to foster a rapid response to the needs of their members;
- they have the potential to prevent the duplication of effort;
- they offer the opportunity to use the synergy of a group to find solutions to common problems; and
- they act as a pressure group.

Women's networks

Women have collected, disseminated and exchanged knowledge and information since the beginning of history but it is only in this century that centres have been set up for the specific purpose of collecting and documenting what has come to be known as women's information. Women's information encompasses a wide spectrum of material including cultural, political and educational data and information. The community of women's information services includes:

- international, national and local women's information centres and network organizations;
- women's documentation and research centres connected to universities;
- gender-specific information available from NGOs and governmental organizations;
- resource centres and libraries in which women's information is collected in addition to information on other subjects; and
- women's magazines, news agencies, radio or television programmes, which function as a focal point for the distribution of women's information in countries where the women's movement is still in its early stages (such as newly democratic countries, countries where war has destabilized development, and rural areas of developing countries).

There are a great variety of women's groups and associations and not all of these would identify themselves as networks. Their priorities are as diverse as the number of issues with which women are concerned. These issues include basic needs and include, through the issues of education and freedom from domestic and civil violence, a concern with the effects of structural adjustment on women and their communities. The context within which women's networks are operating in the South and East is often one in which the infrastructure of civil society has been eroded by economic, political and social malaise. The general situation of paucity of resources, and marginalization of the most vulnerable sectors of society, of which women are one, means that there are few avenues left for women to formalize their social and political activity. In this situation, networking is an avenue open to women who seek information about various problems, needs, capabilities and possible solutions, as it is an accessible strategy which requires few resources. Enthusiasm, dedication, and time are the precious resources needed from members.

However, if networks from the South and East are to operate outside their local and national boundaries, lack of resources becomes more of a constraint. Such networks are disadvantaged compared to their Northern counterparts because they do not always have access to modern methods of communication that are taken for granted in the North and that are necessary for international cooperation. This not only prevents networking between North and South, which is vital for support, cross-fertilization, and solidarity, but also prevents South-South and East-East cooperation, which is one of the issues that has been identified as a priority to enhance the effectiveness of the networks in their own countries, and also to increase their strength and lobbying power in the international arena.

The strategies that these networks have identified to address their many concerns are often very similar. They include dissemination of information through publications such as newsletters and reports; research; the hosting of conferences and seminars; and the provision of training in order to enhance women's ability to access resources and information on a wider scale. Networks can provide organized channels through which all of the above can be made available in a systematic and women-friendly way; as their greatest resource is the women themselves, they are often self-sustaining (ABANTU for Development 1994).

National networking

For the development of a national network of women's information it is necessary to have institutionalized arrangements. Ideally, a lead organization is appointed nationally to carry out a given mandate to coordinate and promote institutional links between information centres and other organizations/institutions involved with women (Silva and Nanayakkara 1985).

Although national centres may be similar to each other in that they have collections of information, these centres may provide information and communicate with women in different ways, in different languages and in different cultural contexts. These centres should be strengthened in such a way that they are able to repackage the information provided at the regional/global level into forms and channels that are suitable for the local situation and users. Likewise, local knowledge and locally produced information is exchanged and shared through the global/regional network with other organizations. National or local networks within developing countries may be constrained by intrusion from the developed world, either in the form of insensitive expansionism by networks from the developed world into territory (spatial or thematic) which those in the developing world regard as their own, or in the form of excessive interference by funding agencies in network operation or agenda setting. They may also have inadequate financial or technical resources for the satisfactory coordination and operation of networks, and inadequate infrastructure (for example, postal and telecommunications services) to allow information handling consistent with the network's communication requirements. Political suspicion and hostility may also be a problem, particularly if the government is sensitive about the themes treated by networks. In addition, local centres may dissolve if they are not linked to national or regional networks.

Functions of a national women's information network may include the following:

- coordinating the flow of information about women;
- collecting, organizing, storing, retrieving and disseminating statistical data related to women from primary and secondary sources, using a basic list of socioeconomic indicators;

- maintaining linkages through the national network with all government offices, research and teaching institutions, training institutes, NGOs, mass media and others concerned with women's issues, as well as general development and human rights issues in the country;
- reviewing and disseminating bibliographic information on a regular basis to the members of the national network and regional and global centres;
- monitoring and disseminating information to the national network members and to the regional centres about national events relevant to women's concerns such as conferences, meetings, seminars, training programmes, political fora, legislative activities;
- organizing meetings, seminars, workshops and training programmes, if feasible and if resources are available; and
- repackaging or summarizing information on women's issues into appropriate formats and languages for dissemination to the general public through the mass media.

Below are some examples of national women's networks:

Tanzania Media Women's Association

The forerunner of the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) was begun in 1979 by a group of women who had just finished journalism school and were beginning work in various media institutions (Alloo 1995). They formed an informal group to produce radio programmes in Kiswahili and in English. In 1987, this professional women's association was officially registered. It aimed to become a vehicle for increasing understanding of the situation of women, as well as educating women about their rights. Since then, TAMWA has developed into an organization with various units, including a documentation centre and library, and a training and publishing unit. It produces the magazine 'Sauti ya Siti' (Voice of Woman), popular education materials, videos of women's cultural histories, radio programmes, posters and brochures.

Women's Information Centre, South Korea

The Women's Information Centre (WIC) was established in South Korea in 1996 to try to meet the country's critical need for data on women (Paik Young-Joo 1997). WIC is part of the Korean Women's Development Institute, an autonomous, non-profit organization which has served as the government's focal point on women's affairs since it was established in 1983. WIC's goals are to facilitate government policymaking and women's research and activities by gathering data on women from various fields, organizing it, packaging it, and distributing it to the national, regional and worldwide audience. To facilitate its work, WIC plans to operate an information network which will link women's focal points in 15 local government offices in South Korea. These focal points will be responsible for collecting data and sharing it with other network users. This network will be available to government agencies, women's organizations and researchers, as well as to the general public. It will be connected with WINAP and other women's networks outside South Korea.

International and regional networking

Networking at the international level has advanced quite far in terms of capabilities, linkages and technology. There are a variety of women's information networks involving NGOs. In addition, the United Nations (UN) system and its specialized agencies have been active in networking, particularly due to efforts begun during the United Nations Decade for Women.

(WINAP 1988). There is also no doubt that the four NGO Fora, held parallel to the UN World Conferences on Women, in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen, Denmark (1980), Nairobi, Kenya (1985) and Beijing, China (1995) have encouraged many women to become involved in the global women's movement (Walker 1998).

Many regional networks have arisen because women's information centres and networks needed support in various areas and wanted to extend links beyond the national level. Other regional/global networks have been created to improve the access to and availability of women's information at national and regional levels by strengthening women's information infrastructures at those levels. Regional/global organizations can coordinate efforts to develop a multilingual classification or thesaurus, sharing the same information processing methodology. To be really effective, they should also build a common regional strategy to address critical concerns in the region, paying particular attention to areas where information about women is lacking.

Functions of a regional women's information network may include the following:

- maintaining regular information exchange with NGOs and other organizations at all levels;
- producing and disseminating a women's information newsletter;
- providing technical assistance and advisory services to national and regional level women's information centres and networks;
- organizing seminars and training workshops;
- building and strengthening the capacities of national women's information centres and networks;
- addressing critical women's concerns in the region; and
- serving as a communication channel and platform among women's organizations, and supporting their activities.

Below are some examples of international and regional women's networks.

International Women's Tribune Centre

One successful example of an organization which has responded to the trend of international networking is the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) which has been operating as an international network and communication support service for women worldwide since 1976 (Walker 1998). Since its beginnings in 1976 following the First UN Conference on Women and the related NGO Forum in Mexico City, the IWTC network has grown from an initial constituency of 6000 members to more than 26,000 throughout the world. Its publications are in English, French and Spanish to guarantee dispersal throughout the main international language groups. Over the past 20 years, the IWTC has also taken on added roles as a resource centre, a source of women and development publications, provider of technical assistance and training, and an outlet for electronic conferencing and networking.

REPEM

The international, regional network, Red de Educacion Popular entre Mujeres de America Latina y el Caribe (REPEM) in Latin America and the Caribbean was set up in 1981 (Scampini Franco 1998). It specializes in adult education for women through popular

education, training, communication and dissemination of materials, comprising a network of 167 NGOs which are divided into five sub-regional groups. REPEM's activities operate in three main areas: gender, citizenship and education; improvement of NGO capacity building and gender training; and gender education and popular economics. The network has always tried to maintain horizontal relationships with its constituent organizations. One of its main concerns is to build linkages between educational processes taking place at the grassroots level and political and economic global analysis, conscious of its role as intermediary between global and local levels.

Networking and ICTs

Technologies such as computers, teleconferences and faxes have become instrumental in the setting up of networks by allowing individuals and groups to connect through time and space. The relationship between knowledge, power and technology is crucial when analysing this type of communication flow. It is often assumed that the horizontal or circular structures provided by women's networks defy the vertical exercise of power and redistribute it, while using the technology for a wider reach and a more friendly use. Electronic networks are currently promoted as useful tools to facilitate community organizing although there are a number of concerns regarding access and control of these networks (Riaño 1994).

Women are taking new steps and increasingly moving in new directions by networking electronically (IWTC 1996). The IWTC considers that 'each day more and more women around the world are using computers to communicate globally. Tapping into worldwide networks … women are talking with one another, planning and "strategizing" as if the whole world were their own community'. The IWTC's stance conflicts with the traditional view of many commentators on the Internet that it is a 'white man's medium'. For example the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Gender and Information Group found that 'most of the positive effects of the information revolution have bypassed women' and that the 'information highway is still predominantly male dominated and often a forum for gender discrimination, intimidation and even harassment' (Huyer 1997). Rosi Braidotti also agrees with these commentators: 'the extent to which the Internet is capital intensive, male dominated, Westernized and English-speaking is simply distressing' (1998).

As discussed earlier, networks from the South and East are often disadvantaged compared to their Northern counterparts (ABANTU for Development 1994). Not only are they disadvantaged but, as in the North, access to modern electronic communications media is gender-biased (Pruett and Deane 1998). Garcia in this publication also underlines the growing polarization in the South between those who do have access to ICTs and those who do not. The Know How Conference itself in its resolutions also highlighted these problems and argued that information centres in the North should use their resources to bridge this gap.

Despite these significant problems of uneven participation and access, ICTs have facilitated the distribution of women's information as well as communication between women. Kole argued, however, that the prevailing discourse on the role of the Internet on the empowerment of women in the South is simplistic and optimistic (1998). This argument was examined using the case study of the use of electronic networking related to the Fourth World Conference on Women. This case demonstrated that ICTs, particularly Internet technologies and E-mail, can contribute to the empowerment of women in NGOs through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and by improving their access to information. Kole reached the conclusion,

however, that although the new technology offers options for empowerment, it is ultimately the non-technical aspects which are the most important and which must be addressed to fully realize the potential of the Internet. Only if these aspects are taken into account can ICTs be used to effectively support the empowerment and participation of women in the South. ICTs are, after all, only a medium for communication; it is the message which is most important.

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