

WOMEN CONNECT: Lessons from Practice

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Background and Overview

This article has been written to inform and update interested bodies on the work that Women Connect has been doing since 2001 when the first Phase report was produced. Much of this article is taken from the Phase 2 report that will be published in the winter of 2004. It also provides information about the international policy context in which we are working and maps out a vision for the future role for Women Connect.

Networking

“(W)omen’s usage of networking is not as a noun, but as a verb. It’s a process, not an end in itself. In that sense, networking is loosely knit and lateral, a contrast with the more closed, hierarchical style of such male counterparts as professional associations, fraternal orders, interlocking directorates and old boys’ networks themselves”.

“In the eighties and nineties, networking is what consciousness-raising was to the seventies. It’s the primary way women discover that we are not crazy the system is. We also discover that mutual-support groups can create change where the most courageous individual woman could not”

Gloria Steinem

Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions

1. An Introduction to Women Connect

Women Connect is a practical response to the resource needs of women's organisations in the voluntary and community sector. Our aim is to help build the capacity of women's to use information and communication technologies (ICT) effectively and thus enable these groups to improve their ability to network, form new partnerships, share information and to engage in democratic participation..

The Context

The UK and International women's sector faces significant challenges. Research shows that throughout the decades women's organisations have been a positive force for global change in many areas. Yet the impact these organisations have made has been limited by long-term under-investment and short term funding strategies (Page & Scott, 1999).

A further significant challenge comes in the form of information and communication technology. ICT's are a significant element of British society and ICT skills are now rated as a third basic life skill after literacy and numeracy (Bradbrook & Fisher, 2004). For many, this heralds the emergence of an 'information society' which has personal implications for individuals directing them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to fully participate and take advantage of the anticipated benefits (Loader & Keeble, 2004).

Such skills however, are not uniformly spread across the population and there is much concern over the emergence of a so-called 'digital divide' between the information rich and the information poor (Loader & Keeble, 2004). This 'divide' maps well to patterns of social exclusion and women are far more likely to be located on the wrong side of this divide--amongst the information poor.

Despite there being growing numbers of women using the Internet, research demonstrates that women appear to be less confident in using ICT. Women also remain the main users of public services and with the continued development of e-government it is vital that women's organisations are skilled and engaged in accessing and maximising ICT use and skills (Bradbrook & Fisher, 2004).

ICT offers immense possibilities for women: they can help women to overcome isolation, provide women with a voice, improve governance and help advance gender equality. Women Connect can help provide the groups in our network with the skills and equipment that they need to adapt to the information society.

The Network

Women Connect has established a network of women's organisations based throughout England. The network currently has over 50 members. The network has also made links with women working in similar ways across the globe. The original aim in selecting organisations to join the network was to achieve a balance and diversity in communities representing for example a range of size, location, services providers and level of experience in using electronic communication. In addition, the project aimed to include a range of communities by involving black and ethnic minority, lesbian, disabled and older women.

For the first phase of the project (December 1997 - November 2000) Women Connect used a matrix to recruit nineteen member organisations to the network. It was expected that all organisations would demonstrate good practice in providing equal opportunities for access, participate fully in project activities and be committed to networking (Page & Scott 1999).

Of the nineteen original members six elected to join phase two of the project. The second phase of the project (2001 – present) recruited an additional twenty-seven organisations to the network. The second phase saw an extension in the types of organisations who can join the network – for example, women’s organisations that are led and managed by women but who are providing services to male perpetrators of domestic violence could join the network.

2. What is Women Connect?

Women Connect was primarily funded to provide new hardware and software or upgrades, and subsidised online costs for the first year of participation to women’s organisations that joined the network. Once accepted as a partner organisation the groups could expect to receive free, training, networking events and subsidised travel to events. The emphasis has always been on the effective use of communication technology rather than technology by itself.

However, the role of Women Connect has evolved over the years. ICT is now much easier and cheaper to acquire than before. Instead of simply providing equipment, Women Connect has been able to focus on providing support to encourage women’s organisations to make better use of the available technologies. The main role of the organisation is now very much one of capacity builder and facilitator.

The Funders

Women Connect is a collaboration between the library association and the Community Development Foundation (CDF). The project started in January 1998, funded by the National Lotteries Charities Board and CDF. The first phase of the project was completed in November 2000. Phase 2 began in 2001 and was funded by the Community Fund and CDF. Funding for the next phase is not yet fully secured.

The Community Development Foundation

The Community Development Foundation (CDF) is a non-departmental public body supported by the Active Community Unit of the Home Office with substantial support from local government, charitable trusts and the private sector. Its role is to pioneer, study and promote new forms of community development, in order to inform public policy, professional practice and community initiatives.

Our Mission

Women Connects’ original mission statement was to ‘use and shape the internet together’. We set out to assist women’s organisations to use and shape the internet for the benefit of women. However in Phase 2 of the project we have updated our objectives due to the numerous benefits

that can be gained from helping organisations to network with one another. Our mission statement now reads;

'To network and connect women online'.

Women Connect aspires to use the internet to build a sustainable community of women's organisations and resource contacts, who are working in a wide range of different fields and communities. The project supports, advises, trains and equips member organisations to develop skills for using the internet and networking. As a result members have the potential to improve their practices, form partnerships, access wider resources and influence decision makers.

Women Connect also works in partnership with other organisations such as the National Alliance of Women's Organisations, the European Women's Lobby, Women's National Commission and the Women's Programme of the Association for Progressive Communications. Our goal is to link up with other projects to build an online presence of value to women in the UK and beyond. The project aims to inspire women to work together to benefit from the potentials of ICT. Our two equal aims in this context are:

- 1) Networking and information exchange as a means of empowerment
- 2) Resourcing the needs of the women's voluntary and community sector

Women Connect's initial sub aims were to:

- Establish an online network of women's organisations that is based on women's needs.
- Increase women's influence over the policies that affect their lives.

To achieve these aims, Women Connect has been committed to:

- Challenging the commonly held view of women's interests in and use of the Internet.
- Advocating for women's access to online facilities and training based on their individual needs and those of groups and organisations.
- Supporting and piloting women's grassroots influence over regional and national policies through online activities

Our Values

Women Connect has developed values that describe the spirit in which we aim to work together. These are here to guide us in practical terms: in our daily working lives; in how we develop policy; and in how we develop the future of the partnership.

1. We recognise that we do not live in a just or equal society and that there are groups of women who are discriminated against because of their beliefs, abilities, sexuality, ethnicity, age, social status, income and health. We are committed to supporting each other to ensure that we do not discriminate against each other.

2. We respect other women's views whether they are the same or different to our own.

3. We have a transparent relationship with one another. We encourage each other not to make assumptions, to communicate to the best of our ability, and to be clear and open.
4. We create a supportive and safe space in which women can learn, develop and have fun. This means that we can learn when and where we want and at a pace that meets our needs and to goals that we decide for ourselves.
5. We are open to personal learning, change and development. We will encourage each other to be reflective, to be flexible in response to challenge and change. We will embrace innovation where it is appropriate.
6. We are committed to working together to influence policies that affect our community of women.
7. We work towards solutions that are sustainable and are aware of the impact on our wider community. We will not take actions that cause harm to others or our environment.

Our Current Activities

One area of our work is to facilitate the networking of women's groups and organizations and other stakeholders, through local and national events. We work to bridge the gap between grassroots and policy. For example, over the past three years we have held three national conferences – 'Women with Megabyte' in May 2003, 'Women with Megabyte II' in June 2004 and 'Raising the Profile' – a national awareness raising day women's organisations in July 2003. Women Connect has also held numerous smaller and more regional ICT workshops. Further details about the events we have hosted can be located on our website.

Another area of our work is action-planning with women's groups and organisations. This entails face to face visiting of groups via outreach work to develop and follow through on agreed action plans. We carry out ICT audits and identify training and development opportunities for ICT strategy implementation.

We also produce a quarterly newsletter, which aims to update women and other stakeholders on topical issues concerning ICT, social cohesion and gender equality and we host an e-discussion group and feed into relevant policy agendas.

3. Women Connect – Phase Two Reflections

This section will look back over what Women Connect has accomplished over the last three years. It is based upon on the findings of the second evaluation report and some interviews with partner organisations conducted by a CDF researcher. This section will run through three case studies of our partner organisations to provide some illustrations of the work Women Connect has done to build our partners organisations capacity.

As ‘good practice’ Women Connect has their work appraised by independent evaluators. We believe that this is necessary in order to ensure that we are working to our objectives and to learn about the areas in which we can make improvements in our work. Women Connect has had two evaluations both conducted towards the end of each phase.

The Phase 1 Evaluation

The Phase 1 Evaluation, conducted by Anne Moggridge of the University of the West of England in 1999, found many positive outcomes of the project. In all cases, the equipment and training supplied by Women Connect had given members access to information and communication resources, which they otherwise would not have had. All the partner organisations also reported improvements in communication and/or access to relevant information as a result of their use of technology. Generally members felt that had increased their skills in effective use of electronic communication and IT, this had enabled members to strengthen and extend their own networks as well as their access to information.

The Delphi forum, a private web based bulletin board only open to members and associates on the Women Connect Web site, also created an online information resource for and with member organisations. In addition the Women Connect web site had attracted considerable praise and interest from women outside the network. Several member organisations also reported example of women who had contacted the group having discovered them through the web site.

The evaluation report also noted that there was little evidence that a supportive network had been established. However, the researcher found that a looser network was evolving, extending beyond the boundaries of the project itself so that in the future many more women may be able to benefit from opportunities to access and shape the internet.

Despite much optimism at the start of the project, the evaluation reported that it appeared that the project had become one of providing technology and training in ITCs. Whilst it may have been very successful in doing this, its true potential as a facilitator or umbrella organisation had been more difficult to achieve.

Phase 1 served effectively as a pilot for Women Connect, it tested the approach Women Connect took and our starting assumptions about the learning needs of women’s organisations for ICT and the potential for their usage. It demonstrated the importance of face to face networking opportunities in stimulating partnerships and networking. Recommendations put forward in this evaluation have helped Women Connect to move in a new direction. As well as supplying IT equipment and training, it was time for Women Connect to have networking as a dual objective.

Phase 2 Evaluation

The Phase 2 evaluation was conducted by Leigh Keeble, of the University of Teesside in February 2004. The data that informed the evaluation came from questionnaires distributed to over a 1000 women's organisations, interviews conducted with the staff at the Community Development Foundation and interviews with Women Connect project staff from the first and second phases of the project. Leigh also conducted interviews with some of Women Connects partner organisations at two events run by Women Connect; the 'Women with Megabyte' conference and 'Raising the Profile'.

The following sections will run through the major findings from the second evaluation. It will be structured as the evaluation report was structured around the three of the key aims of the Women Connect project: Capacity building, networking and influencing policy.

Capacity Building - Has Women Connect helped partner projects enhance their organisational capacity to help deliver what they want to deliver?

Main Findings from the Evaluation:

The introduction of PCs and connectively had increased the capacity of organisations in three ways:

- The use of PCs for office administration has streamlined many administrative activities.
- The interactive nature of access to the internet and email has allowed for changes in the way that some of the groups communicate
- Some groups have been able to extend the services that they are able to offer to their projects users.

There was a general perception amongst the first phase interviewees that computing skills had improved. During the second phase of Women Connect, it was more likely that the organisations had more than one computer and that were used everyday and most staff and volunteers felt confident in using them.

'Thanks to Women Connect our administration has become computerised...we no longer have just boxes full of information, it's all on the computer...even our pay system is now on the computer'
Partner Project, August 2003

The evidence from the research suggested that skills in computing had increased and if staff and volunteers were able to use the computers to assist with administrative tasks then the capacity of their projects had certainly been augmented.

The use of ICTs to improve communication both between staff, volunteers and agencies outside the organisation was also continuously identified as a positive benefit to the partners. The researcher also found other example of management committees of projects to communicate, circulate minutes and make decisions using email.

Leigh also found other examples of where the introduction of PCs meant that a project was able to extend or consider extending the services they were offering to users. For example, one project had been able to provide basic ICT skills training to women, another organisation had developed an online forum providing help and advice for victims of rape.

Networking - Has an online network of women's organisations been created?

Main Findings from the Evaluation:

- There was little evidence of the creation of a supportive network amongst the Women Connect Partners
- There was considerable evidence of the partner projects using the technology to extend and enhance their own network
- The project partners need a clear reason to network with other partners.

The Phase 2 evaluation found very little evidence that Women Connect has created an online network of women's organisations. The discussion group web site for chatting online is barely used. There are many reasons for this which range from women not having the time to chat online, to being nervous of asking questions and disappointment from no getting no response back when they did post questions online.

However, what was apparent from the interviews was that the support of Women Connect has allowed many of the groups to develop and extend their own networks. This was regarded as an extremely positive outcome of the project. A high proportion of groups felt that their communications had been enhanced as a result of being online.

Face to face events organised by women connect are also very popular. Many of those attending the events left feeling convinced that they would make contact with some of those groups that they had met. In reality, though, this rarely happened as many found no strong reason to make contact. For many, the attraction to join Women Connect was being part of a women only network. The diversity of the groups involved in the project meant that the groups have struggled to find a reason to network (interim report phase 2, p6) However, it was felt by some of the interviewees that if partners did attend more face to face vents, they would perhaps have more reason to network,

'In the first phase of the project there was an expectation that women's movement type organisation would 'join'. Defining those types of organisations was problematic. Again there was an expectation that women's movement organisations would naturally want to network but that just didn't happen. There remains a question as to how you make a network work.' CDF Manager, July 2002

Whilst the second phase of Women Connect has seen an extension in the types of organisations who can join the network for example orgs that provide services to women not just those made up of women, the issues still remains as to why they should network.

If Women Connect is to continue the development of the network into an area of active participation by its partner projects the evaluation recommended that it must consider the capacity of the organisations to do this and the demands placed on Women Connect staff in generating and encouraging participation.

Influencing Policy - Has Women Connect helped to increase women's influence over the policies that affect their lives?

Main findings:

- Women Connect can influence and input into policy consultations and decision making both via women connect staff and the individual projects.
- Whilst there is some evidence of projects actively engaged in the policy process, more help and support is needed to focus this activity.
- The Women Connect web site provides links to consultations of potential interest to partners but could be more active in engaging the partners.
- Information about the growing developments and potential web sites providing support in different areas of health and social care should be shared with partner projects.

There has been a growing amount of discussion around the potential of the internet to improve civic participation and encourage democracy. However there is little evidence that the internet is actually achieving this. Education continues to be the key to civic participation as educated information seekers tend to use the internet to inform their beliefs and are more likely to be interested in public debate and politics (Loader & Keeble, 2004).

However there does appear to be a role to support and train people to actively participate in consultations and democracy. This is where Women Connect can greatly assist.

The researcher identified that the Women Connect project coordinator has been active in engaging in policy dialogues with a range of organisations including the Women's Equality Unit, the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Women's National Commission, National Alliance of Women's organisations and the Gender and Trade expert group. This work has continued with the coordinator now working with CDF on an Active European Communities and European Development project (ACED) to try to influence the funding criteria of European Structural Funds from purely economic outputs to including issues of social capital and active participation.

From the perspective of the partner projects there is evidence that the introduction of the technology and the internet to the groups has led to some becoming involved in projects which will have an impact on those groups or in policy debates. For example, it was noted that one of the groups had used the internet to take part in a national debate; another group had participated in a conference run by CDF in which she discussed the role of her project in providing a community for survivors of domestic violence.

In addition to the work conducted by the project coordinator and the individual projects, the Women Connect staff have used the website to provide access to government consultations that affect women's lives. For example, the White Paper 'Fairness for all: A New Commission for Equality and Human Rights', the Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure document – both

of which Women Connect responded to as an organisation. It has not been possible to establish how many of the partner projects have actually made use of this facility although from the interviews it was noted that very few of the partner organisations accessed the Women Connect Web site – suggesting limited use of the links to consultation.

Women Connect has also produced quarterly newsletters that contain a range of content which includes high lightening current polices and debates that potentially affect women. For example the World Summit on the Information Society has recently taken place and Women Connect has worked to raise awareness of the summit through the network whilst highlighting the lack of consideration given to issues of gender throughout the summit.

The newsletter also contains information on events Women Connect are hosting, information on current ICT policy and planning and what's going on in the IT sector and often links to other websites that may be useful to help update ICT skills. There is also a section and links to other topics that may be of interest such as funding and resources. We also include a section introducing partners who have recently joined the network and updates on what other partner's have been doing.

The Case Studies

This section will look at three case studies of our partner organisations. We have chosen three very different types of organisations to give the reader an idea of the range of organisations we are involved with. The case studies will provide a quick introduction to the organisation and the work they are involved with, before looking at what Women Connect has done to help increase the organisations capacity.

Case Study 1 – Newham Asians Women's Project

Newham Asians Women's Project (NAWP) was set up in 1987 to provide advice and support for Asian women and children experiencing domestic violence. Initially the group opened a hostel to provide emergency accommodation for Asian women and their children escaping violent family and home environments. Since then they have expanded and the group now operates from seven sites, a refuge, a second stage hostel and a resource centre all in outer London. Services at the resource centre include legal advice, training, mental health support, counselling, project on self harm, and a young women's support group and other support groups called Teens.

NAWP wanted to join the Women Connect Network and get online in order to make their services accessible to more women, especially those unable or who experience difficulties leaving their homes. They also wanted to make communication within the organisation and with other agencies more effective and efficient. NAWP's IT system needed revamping as their server was overloaded, not all computers were connected to the main server and the system was very slow as they were not connected to broadband. The project was worried that they were not making the most of the equipment they had.

Once the Project had joined the Women Connect network, Women Connects project worker went to visit the group in February 2003 to draw up an action plan to assess the equipment the group has in place, the groups needs, the next steps the groups need to take and the help needed to get the group there. The key priorities identified included upgrading the groups ICT equipment and review

their internal communications and administrative systems. The group also wanted to establish a website.

Women Connect financially contributed to the development of their website which is now up and running and can be seen at <http://www.nawp.org/>

The last chair of NAWP was involved with our Raising the Profile event, member of the project have also attended both our national conferences.

Case Study 2 – The Freedom and Empowerment Network

The Freedom and Empowerment network works with women in the Wirral who are experiencing/ have experienced domestic violence. The group runs programmes and self help groups that enable women to see the beliefs and tactics of the abuser. Knowledge of the tactics used against the women empowers them to break free of the beliefs that enable domestic violence. The network also provides speakers and trainers to raise awareness of the issues of domestic violence and networks with other local organisations that work with women in mental health, alcohol and drug abuse.

Before the network joined Women Connect the group did not have access to the internet as they lacked adequate computers and the necessary funds. The network was desperate to get online in order to improve communication within the group. They were also really keen to get online so that they could access information and statistics available on the web in order to influence policy at a national level by networking with other groups to push for changes in the law and the way women are treated in society.

Once accepted as part of the network our project worker arranged to visit the organisation and formulate an action plan agreed upon by both Women Connect and the Freedom and Empowerment Network. The action plan identified some key priorities; these included improving the networks communication processes, developing a website and upgrading the networks computers.

Women Connect provided the Freedom and Empowerment Network with an internet ready machine. This has made a real difference to the way their work. One example is of a tale relayed to us about a woman the project visited. The women in question had three school aged children who were not attending school. She was receiving £150 a week widow's pension and her rent was £90 a week. She had no other income and was seriously depressed. The Network felt the financial situation was pivotal to the family unit and needed attention.

As a result of the new equipment the network was able to access the internet and calculate the woman's child tax credit entitlement. She has subsequently received a backdated payment of £1000 and her life is now free of the dire poverty the family was experiencing. The network has reported that there is now renewed hope in the family for a happier future.

The Freedom and Empowerment Network has also played a significant role in the Women Connect network. Members of the group have hosted a workshop on domestic violence at the Women with Megabyte II Conference, and at CDF conference on 'Safe Communities' The network facilitated a discussion group on safety 'In the Home' which was about why women

underreport domestic violence and what needs to happen to encourage women to report. For more information on this please see: <http://www.womenconnect.org.uk/C2B/events/Event.asp?ID=32&CatID=2>

Case Study 3 – The Women’s Organic Community Allotment Association

The Women's Organic Community Allotment is a community group that enables women to grow organic food and herbs on an allotment in Sheffield. The group promotes allotments as a friendly, inviting place for women to use and help to re-address the imbalance of female allotment users. The association aims to promote health and well being through the physical work involved with gardening, eating local, fresh, organic produce, the self-confidence gained through learning new skills and working with others, enjoying a relationship with the natural environment and the empowerment of being able to help women to create the ultimate necessity in life – food.

Before joining Women Connect, the allotment association had limited IT equipment. The group wanted to get online in order to attract more volunteers and so they could be a source of advice, inspiration and support to other women’s groups and food and environmental issues groups.

Their action plan highlighted key areas for organisational development and resourcing. This resulted in the group receiving a new computer and printer, modem and software from Women Connect.

Being part of the network has had many benefits for the allotment association. They believe that having a computer and email has meant that are taken more seriously. Email has been particularly beneficial for the group in that they have been able to make connect with local and national organisations on issues around food giving and advice. The internet has also allowed the group to take part in the national debate regarding GM crops

As part of the network the association has attended a regional training event in Sheffield for women using ICT’s for organisational sustainability. They have also contributed to the Women Connect website with information about the Women’s Organic Community Allotment Association and have helped raise awareness of the Women Connect project locally amongst other women’s organisations in Sheffield.

4. Online and Offline Networking

This section reflects on the networking barriers women face both online and offline.

Many of the barriers faced by Women Connect are not specific to women’s organisations, but are shared by other voluntary and community sector organisations of similar size and resources. One of the prime examples of this is the lack of long term strategic funding faced by Women Connect.

Generally the voluntary and community sector suffers from short term unstable funding. The funding culture in which most voluntary and community sector organisations function is that projects are funded for typically one to three years. This can often create many difficulties. In

many cases the funding runs out and the project finished right at the point when it is operating at its most effective. Short term funding also means that projects are constantly looking for other sources of funding instead of concentrating on their mission. Even if another funder is found new contracts can mean that the original mission of the project will have to change/ adapt.

This situation is worse outside of the UK where there is no tradition of a voluntary sector. Women's organisations are well use to working with very little if any funding to create a lot in terms of change.

The fact that Women Connect exists and is able to draw attention to the inequity of funding, the resource needs of women and the positive power of networking within the UK and beyond.

For example the network connections that have been possible using technology since Beijing (the UN Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO Forum 1995) have been invaluable to the UK women's sector. This can be seen in a policy context not least in getting recognition by the UK Government of the CEDAW Convention. The alliances that have been strengthened across Europe would not have had the same energy if networking technology did not exist. Having said that, the recent Berlin Women's Conference 2004 was a time to reflect that the struggles of women in 1904 when the first Berlin Conference took place were not dissimilar to today's struggles and when networked and communicated and came together to celebrate and work for change without highspeed broadband or even email.

One keynote speaker at that conference reflected:

African women had come to be part of the political processes and claiming their rights as human rights and voters' rights were: women should grab power. Do not expect men to bring it to you on a golden plate, as men have to fight to grab the power from other men so do not expect them to bring it to women for free.

The discrepancy that still occurs to women having access to the global world should be acknowledged. Women in her district have oil lamps to read the books, if she can read, but no electricity to download from a website for instance.

The word download is meaningless to her, just like running water from the tap, television, etc. We have to be careful that the world does not become more divided between north and south, rich and poor. Networking is the most essential thing for women, but only feasible if women find accessible ways to communicate with each other.

Inge von Bönninghausen, the key-note speaker H.E. *Ambassador Gertrude I. Mongella* (better known as Mama Beijing) from Tanzania and currently the President of the Pan-African Parliament and President of Advocacy for Women in Africa, Secretary General of the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995)

5. Women Connect: Community Development & The UK Policy Context

How Women Connects work relates to Community Development

Women Connect is based in the Community Development Foundation in London. The Community development Foundation (CDF) is a non departmental public body supported by the Active Community Directorate of the Home Office.

So why is Women Connect based at the CDF? The work that Women Connect is involved with is led by the ideas that underpin Community Development work. Community development is a nebulous term but it is generally agreed that much of the work done with community development is about capacity building. The Home Office provides a good definition of community capacity building;

‘Activities, resources and support that strengthen the skills and abilities of people through enabling them to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their communities’.

Basically, capacity building is the development of an organization’s core skills and capabilities, such as leadership, management, finance and fundraising, programs and evaluation, in order to build the organization’s effectiveness and sustainability. It is the process of assisting an individual or group to identify and address issues and gain the insights, knowledge and experience needed to solve problems, implement change and to take part in democratic processes.

Women Connect use a range of community development tools such as networking, newsletters, outreach work, action planning, face-2-face meetings, workshops and conferences to strengthen the skills and abilities of women, enabling them to take effective action and leading roles in the development of their community.

Women Connect and the UK Policy Context

We now want to turn our attention to policy in the UK, European and International contexts concern gender and ICT. We have included this aspect in this article so as to provide a simple introduction to these important new policies that women need to be aware of, yet often aren’t.

It is a major concern that government policies do not filter down to the grassroots level. Many people believe that government policy is something that they will never understand or indeed have any affect them upon them. We cannot emphasis strongly enough that this is not the case. Women need to be informed about such policies so that the struggle for equality for both genders is at the forefront of policy.

The UK Policy Context

We cannot allow gender to slip off the government’s agenda as gender equality is far from being achieved. Women still face discrimination in many areas of their lives. For example, statistics shockingly reveal that:

- The pay gap between men and women still remains at 18% after 30 years.
- Nearly half of women in the UK have a gross individual income of less than £100 a week, compared to just over one fifth of men.

- Reported rape has trebled in the last decade but the conviction rate has dropped from 24% to 6%.
- Two women a week are killed by their current or former partner.
- The female prison population almost trebled between 1993 and 2003.
- Women in pensioner couples receive just 32p for every £1 of income received by men.
- On graduating women can expect to be paid 15% less than men.
- We have only 118 women in the House of Commons – this means that only 18% of MPs are women
- Only 28% of local councillors are women.

All figures from the Fawcett Society Website: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk>

This section will provide a brief overview of some of the most important policies that are currently being debated over in UK in relation to gender. If you are interested in reading about any of the subjects touched upon in this section in more detail please follow the web links provided or see the bibliography in the appendices for suggestions on further reading and useful websites.

The New Commission for Equality and Human Rights

The current equality commissions are about to go through a major transition. In October 2003 the Government announced its intention to establish a single commission for Equality and Human Rights. A white paper 'Fairness for All: A New Commission for Equality and Human Rights' was published by the Department of Trade and Industry. This paper proposes a merger of the Commission for Racial Equality, The Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission into the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). The new commission will also incorporate, for the first time, four new strands of age, faith, sexual orientation and human rights

The Government believes that the existing commissions have laid an excellent basis on which we can build, but the changing nature of society poses significant new and complex challenges to social, economic and political life. The new commission will be responsible for promoting equality throughout our whole society and will be better equipped to respond to these challenges. One of the commission's major advantages is that it will be able to tackle deprivation on multiple grounds, as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will provide a single access point to information, advice and guidance.

However, some women's groups have expressed anxiety that gender might get pushed to the back of the government's agenda with such a merge. There is ongoing concern that some streams may be marginalized and women's organisations are particularly concerned that gender might find itself at the bottom of a hierarchy of discrimination. The Northern Ireland experience of a similar Equality Commission is evidence that this can happen as in this particular case the majority of resources were allocated to faith. If the new commission is to deliver strong, joined up working, there must be no possibility that one strand is seen as having priority over another.

<http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/equality/project/>

The Gender Duty – A Summary

Since 1999, the Government has promised to introduce a gender duty. This has been touched on again in 'Fairness for All; A New Commission for Equality and Human Rights'. A gender duty would oblige public bodies to promote equality and eliminate discrimination between women and men – this would be the biggest change to gender equality legislation since the Sex Discrimination Act was introduced 30 years ago. However, at present the legal duty on public bodies to promote equality applies only to race and it is about to be extended to disability, but not to gender.

The government is currently drafting the legislation for a gender duty and it is hope that the bill will go through parliament in the 2004/2005 session with the New Commission for Equality and Human Rights bill. Women Connect strongly supports the introduction of a gender duty. We need this gender duty to bring law on gender equality more in line with law on race and disability. It would mean that public bodies have to ensure that they take the needs of women and men into account equally in the way they provide services. This positive duty would mark a radical new approach to eliminating discrimination and achieving equality.

After three decades of legislation that only tackles individual discrimination *after* they occur, this duty would herald a radical new approach to eliminating discrimination achieving equality – it is important for the public sector to lead by example. The duty will help to combat institutional sexism in our public services. In the long termed it is hoped that the duty will be extended to the private and voluntary sectors – particularly when carrying out contracts for public bodies.

<http://www.equalities.org/issues-psdg.htm>

Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution July 2004

The Home Office has recently published a consultation paper, Paying the Price, which offers some possibilities for the first major overhaul of laws surrounding prostitution in almost 50 years. The paper has been published to prompt a public debate on how to deal with the issues raised by prostitution in England and Wales.

Research findings listed in the consultation paper demonstrates that traditional enforcement methods such as police crackdowns are not working. Ministers say they are open-minded about the changes that are needed and the official consultation paper is careful to list both sides of the argument in its discussion of the options for controlling on- and off-street sex trade.

The Home Office welcomes views on the paper from everyone with an interest in this area of public policy, but particularly from those with experience of involvement in prostitution, those with experience of the impact of prostitution in their neighbourhood, and from those agencies - both voluntary and statutory - working in this field. It is hoped that the feedback from the paper will pave the way for the development of a coordinated strategy for prostitution – aimed at reducing the harms associated with prostitution, experienced by those involved and by those communities in which it takes place.

To view the document please follow this link:

http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs3/paying_the_price.html

The IT Policy Context

➤ **Promoting Social Inclusion Using ICT**

ICT is now viewed as the 3rd basic life skill after literacy and numeracy. However, after many government initiatives and campaigns to promote the usage of ICT, more than one third of adults have never been online. Digital inclusion is a cross cutting issue and many of those who do not use ICT's are often the same groups who are at risk of becoming socially excluded. Therefore, promoting digital inclusion is closely linked to solving social exclusion issues. The government is currently investing significant funds in promoting social inclusion using ICT – below we will take a quick look at a number of the schemes the government is currently involved with to promote British Citizens involvement with government and ICT.

In terms of women and ICT - the gender gap in ownership and access to ICTs is diminishing. However there are still varying differences in men and women's abilities to use the technology. Inclusion into the Information Society is much more than just an issue of technology diffusion, or of acquiring or gaining access to ICT artifacts.

Women Connect supports women's orgs to develop their ICT potential. The introduction and development of the e-government agenda means that women's organisations need to be skilled in accessing, using, educating and providing information and support via electronic service delivery. Women Connect has the potential to contribute to this agenda which is most important as women are the main users of public services and many of the organisations Women Connect currently support provide frontline public services.

➤ **E-government**

The government has recently reiterated its commitment to ensure that over 500 government services are delivered online by 2005. The portal www.direct.gov.uk has now formally replaced its predecessor, UKOnline, as the official first port of call for information on public services across all parts of government. Its tag line is 'the place to turn to for the latest and widest range of public service information'. Through this web site it is possible to order a new passport, pay your television license, register to vote, find a job and get foreign travel advice amongst many other services.

Today, over two-thirds of government services are online, every local council has a website, and 96% of Britain's population is aware of a place where they can readily access the internet (e-envoy report 2003). Some sites, such as NHS Direct, driving theory test bookings, Companies House and UCA however have proved really successful, the 2003 report adds.

However, despite the growing numbers of such services being available online, take up of these online services is really low; the 2003 report by the Office of the E-Envoy quotes that three-quarters of British citizens have never visited a government website. Despite the introduction of self-assessment tax returns and online benefits, only 8% of internet users have ever carried out an online transaction with the government.

Interestingly, a disabled female internet user who attended our Women with MegaByte 2 Conference was quick to point out that in a survey conducted by SCOPE the governments websites were found to be the least user friendly for the disabled. Amazon, the BBC and RNIB were given as examples of great websites for disabled users.

➤ **E-citizens**

Parity, an IT training specialist, has recently launched the e-Citizen learning programme, the first basic ICT skills qualification to be accredited by the British Computer Society (BCS). The course is intended to help people cross the digital divide, and offers a flexible way to acquire all the necessary skills to use computers and the Internet. It takes a few hours to complete and culminates in an e-Citizen qualification, which is the entry level stepping stone to the ECDL learning programme (European Computer Driving License).

The training takes students through a step-by-step programme, from the basics of starting up a computer to getting on the web. Students can then begin to use the Internet in their everyday lives, and benefit from improved job prospects and access to online services including email, shopping, local services, even online voting.

➤ **E-learning**

If someone is learning in a way that uses ICT then that is e-learning. E-learning means using new multimedia technology and the internet to improve the quality of learning. Multimedia technologies allow the use of movie, audio and text to enrich the contents. The internet gives easy access to resources and services and it can empower the individual where ever they are – people can learn at school, at university at work and at home. One of the main objectives for e-learning is to reduce the disparities and inequalities between groups and individuals by providing universal access for all.

A Summary

The UK Government emphasis on providing services through ICT is a double edged sword for women. Many specific groups of women are going to be at risk of exclusion; both older women and disabled are going to have to face many barriers in accessing the ICT, women whose first language is not English may also have problems understanding the websites. At the same time though, providing services through the internet means universal access for all. The government will have to be extremely careful to ensure that:

- a) Mechanisms are in place to provide for the needs of groups at risk of exclusion
- b) Content on government websites is equally accessible to everyone

The Governments approach to reaching citizens online is in marked contrast to the approach Women Connect takes in assisting our partners to develop their ICT skills and get online. Women Connect's approach is closely linked to community development work. We take an action planning approach and consult with each group individually to establish the organisations needs. We believe that face to face contact is important in the initial stages of helping groups get online and that our groups have the right to feed into the action planning process.

This differs tremendously from the approach the Government is taking which is about training rather than starting and finishing were people are or want to be. The Government is primarily concerned with training people to develop skills necessary for the workplace and easing the bureaucratic burden of form filling. Both of these are necessary and important, but Women

Connect feel this approach is lacking and is not joined up with the current policy move towards consultation and inclusion.

There is now much government rhetoric about getting citizens involved and a concern to consult with the public on their views and opinions – Tony Blair’s ‘Big Conversations’ are such an example. However, this rhetoric is not backed up by the government websites. The limited models for training people in ICTs are not going to suit everybody. Different groups have very different needs and from the information our partners are feeding back to us, UKOnline for one, was not catering to needs of our partner organisations. That has now gone into the hands of the University for Industry, who are openly proud of their forthcoming strategy that completely ignores women and their ICT needs. Government initiatives such as this need to join up with the current move towards consulting the public and also helping citizens become more informed about and involved with the policy making processes. E-Citizens for example is not about developing people as citizens rather it is about providing training.

6) The European and International Policy Context

Europe

Britain has now been part of the European Union (EU) for 30 years and whilst many people are not fully aware of what the EU does it has had a major impact on our everyday lives. The most important decision making is now happening in the EU and women need to be involved in the decision making processes in order for women’s interests to be represented. We have to ask who is deciding what Europe is and it seems that men are, as statistics on gender in the EU show that men are dominating the decision making processes. Europe has the potential to improve every woman’s life and we have to ensure that women are equal partners in the design process.

The media has generally portrayed a very negative image of the European Union. More information has to be provided so that women get a more balanced view of Europe. We need more widely published information that demonstrates how people have already benefited from the UK’s involvement in the EU. For example how the single market makes it easier for British businesses to have access to their biggest market and how it also gives consumers access to a greater variety and quality of products at competitive prices.

EU funding has also helped create jobs and regenerate poorer areas; for example the UK will receive EU structural funds worth £10 billion between 2000 and 2006. Cornwall, Merseyside, South Yorkshire and West Wales have qualified for special EU funds worth £3.3 billion. The funds also support areas blighted by decline – between 2000 – 06 for example £2.8 billion will be spent on the industrial, urban and rural sector. The UK is also eligible for an additional £2.9 billion for education, training and employment programmes in the same period.

The European Union & Women

Equal opportunities for women and men have also become a significant issue in the European Union. Since the creation of the European Communities in 1957, legislation on equality for women and men has made extensive progress. The first legislative step was to guarantee equal pay for

women and men. Now European legislation has been extended to cover all forms of sexual discrimination in the workplace. Women in Britain now benefit from an EU agreement which means that they automatically qualify for maternity leave without having to work for the same employer for two years. It is also a ruling of the European Court of Justice that women are not discriminated against in occupational pensions (European Women's Lobby, 2002).

In the areas where Member States have given the EU the power to act, European laws take precedence over national legislation, and a national law that contravenes European law has to be changed. In other words, if progress is made at the European level, it must be incorporated at the national level. It is therefore *essential* for women to be fully informed of the possibilities the European Union has to offer and to be involved into the EU making policies and to promote gender equality at the EU level.

However, at the European level, women are worryingly under represented. For example, in 2000 women accounted for:

- 17.1% of members of the Economic and Social Committee (various interest groups representing the EU's economic and social sectors)
- 14.9% of the Committee of the Regions (222 delegates from local and regional political groups in the Member States who defend the interests of their region)
- 6.5% of the European Council (composed of heads of State and government)
- The European Convention on the Future of Europe comprises only 16,2% women - (Women in Europe Report Resource Paper for the EWL Seminar - "Capacity building for gender equality in view of European Union enlargement" WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING)

Although it remains modest, progress is visible in the area of political decision-making. The idea of parity and positive action as vital conditions for democracy seems to be making headway. Many women's organisations feel that parity democracy (women constituting 50% of the membership of all decision-making bodies) should be added to the agenda for the revision of the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The measures proposed for achieving democratic parity range from thresholds for parity to target figures to positive action. The process will involve changes to election laws at European and national level and the elimination of constitutional and legal obstacles to the introduction of quotas or positive action (European Women's Lobby, 2003).

To help this process the European Commission could draft guidelines, to be followed by national action plans, for the promotion of women in decision-making created by the Member States. These plans should lay down clear objectives and budgets and establish assessment mechanisms. A great example of parity in practice is the Welsh Assembly. Women make up 50% of assembly members in Wales – the Welsh assembly has the highest proportion of women's representation in the world and is the only national parliament in the world with equal representation of men and women.

To learn more about the EU see: <http://europa.eu.int/>

For information on Women in Europe see
<http://www.womenlobby.org/home-en.asp?LangName=english>

➤ **The Referendums**

The UK government has promised to hold a referendum (a vote where all the people in the country are asked if they agree with a particular proposal or policy) about joining the euro. However it looks more unlikely that they will hold a referendum on the changes to the EU Constitution as recommended by the Convention for the Future of Europe

The draft Constitution proposes a complete change in the way that the European Commission works. For the first time it lays out the objectives and values of the EU, enshrining the right to strike, the objective of full employment and social justice, equality and solidarity and gives the EU new powers to harmonise legal systems across Europe.

These are important changes and they will have a real impact on our lives. The people ought to have the right to decide whether we accept the new constitution. Women also need to take an active interest in the constitution to ensure our needs and interests are accounted for.

To learn more about the referendum process and how to lobby the government please see this link: <http://www.labour-referendum.org/>

Internationally

At the international level there are also many policies that women need to be informed about. Here we will look at the UN Convention on the Discrimination of Women and applaud the government for recently signing the optional protocol of the convention. We also take a quick look at the Millennium Development Goals and the Beijing Platform for Social Action as well at one of the latest and most exciting programmes for incorporating gender analysis

➤ **The Committee of Elimination of Discrimination against Women (C.E.D.A.W)**

The UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women was adopted in 1979. When a government signs up to the Women's Convention it is under an obligation to bring its laws and practices into compliance with the convention. The women's convention protects women against discrimination by public authorities or agents of the state. It also holds a state party responsible for discriminatory acts committed by private individuals or organisations.

Article 17 of the Women's Convention established a committee on the elimination of discrimination against women that we now know as CEDAW. The committee consists of 23 experts who have signed up to the convention and are elected by ballot. Governments that have ratified the convention are obliged to submit reports to CEDAW on their implementation of the convention every four years.

There is an optional protocol that countries can sign which means that any individual women or group, whose rights have been violated under the convention, will be able to take the case to CEDAW on condition that all effective means of domestic remedies have been exhausted. Women Connect are pleased to say that under the recommendations of the Women and Equality Unit, Britain has now signed this optional protocol. This is a good example of what can be achieved when women's groups work together to lobby government.

➤ **The UN Millennium Development Goals**

In September 2000, eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit. Nearly 190 countries have subsequently signed up to these goals.

They were introduced as part of a wider attempt to encourage the international community to stop talking about making a difference in the developing world and join forces to do something about it.

These goals commit those that signed up to an expanded vision of development - one that vigorously promotes human development as the key to sustaining social and economic progress in all countries, and recognizes the importance of creating a global partnership for development.

In total there are eight goals. These are:

- 1) To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) To achieve universal primary education
- 3) To promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) To reduce child mortality
- 5) To improve maternal health
- 6) To combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7) To ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) To develop a global partnership for development

18 targets related to these goals have been set to give the international community a number of tangible improvements to aim for within a fixed period of time. This also makes it easier for countries to measure their progress.

The intention is that almost all of these targets will be achieved by 2015. The Department for International Development (DFID) recognizes that the Millennium Development Goals have a crucial part to play in reducing poverty and encouraging progress in the developing world. As a result, DFID has made them the main focus of all of its work.

The third millennium development goal is to promote gender equality and empower women. The target set for this goal is:

Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.

Unfortunately, while some significant progress is being made towards meeting some of the targets in some of the affected countries, in many cases progress is patchy, too slow or non-existent. For example, although improvements have been made in many areas in Sub-Saharan Africa the number of people living in poverty there is still greater now than it was in 1990. We have to continue to lobby governments to ensure that work continues to be done to meet these goals.

➤ **The Beijing Platform for Action**

However, there is a tension between the MDG's and the Beijing Platform for Action. Some women's organisations are concerned that one may overshadow the other. NAWO, for example, believes that there is an 'uneasy relationship' between the two projects. Gender equality has to be at the forefront of the goals otherwise they will fail.

What is the Beijing Platform for Action?

The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims to 'remove all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making'.

This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. The Platform for Action reaffirms the fundamental principle (set forth in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights) that the human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. As an agenda for action, the Platform seeks to promote and protect the full enjoyment of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their life cycle.

The Platform for Action emphasizes that women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world. It respects and values the full diversity of women's situations and conditions and recognizes that some women face particular barriers to their empowerment.

The Platform for Action requires immediate and concerted action by all to create a peaceful, just and humane world based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the principle of equality for all people of all ages and from all walks of life, and to this end, recognizes that broad-based and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development is necessary to sustain social development and social justice.

The Millennium development goals and the Beijing Platform for Action are both policies that could really make a difference in helping to promote women's right and equality. However we have to carefully monitor how closely governments are working to meet the targets set by both programmes and lobby them in areas where they are failing to make achievements.

To learn more about these programmes please see:

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/plat1.htm>

➤ **Association for Progressive Communication – The Womens Networking Support Programme.**

At the international level Women Connect heard and seen many examples of inspirational women working to create change within their communities with and without technology. These stories are full of courage and initiative, and serve to enthuse and motivate us to continue to work and network with women on and offline.

One good example is the work being done by the Women's Networking Support Programme at the Association for Progressive Communication. The programme is a global network that supports women networking for social change and empowerment through ICT's. The network consists of over 130 individual female members from thirty six countries.

In the last ten years, the support programme has been active in advocating for a gender perspective in ICT policies, training women in the strategic use of these technologies, supporting women's

networks and investigating women's conditions as well as exploring gender issues in relation to the emergence of the what is now being referred to as the 'information' society. Three years ago, the Women's network embarked on a pioneering project to develop an evaluation framework and methodology (GEM) to examine how ICT's are empowering women and contributing to achieving gender equality.

Overview of Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) toolkit.

Traditionally gender differences and disparities have been ignored in policies and programmes dealing with the development and dissemination of improving technologies. As a result women have benefited less from and been disadvantaged from technological advances.

Women therefore need to be actively involved in the definition, design and development of new technologies otherwise the information revolution is in danger of bypassing women. GEM provides a means for determining whether ICTS are really improving women's lives and gender relations, as well as promoting positive change at the individual, community and broader social level.

The first version of GEM was designed two years ago and was tested on 26 projects internationally. From findings from the piloting process they have revised the tool and are now at point of completing the revision.

For more information on the tool please visit the GEM website which offers a comprehensive oversight on the tool and how to use it. The APC WNSP has published the GEM Tool under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike License. Under this license you are free to use the tool.

To find more information about the tool please see: <http://www.apcwomen.org/gem/go4gem/>

Concluding Comments.

As this article has tried to show Women Connect is supporting women's use of technology so that change will take place not least through and by women's active political participation. From the feedback from two evaluations and our partner organisations it appears that our work is done in terms of providing equipment in the UK. Most organisations already have their own equipment and now there are many other ways of getting hold of equipment both cheaply and easily.

Women now may have the equipment to get online but we need to concentrate on helping women's organisations develop their capacity to network with one another in order to ensure that gender never slips off governments agendas. Women Connect is led by what our partners want and our partners want to be able to use ICT effectively. Women Connect is now concentrating on getting women's organisations together for face to face encounters and to learn the lessons from using ICT to network effectively.

Equality between the sexes has by no means been achieved and it vital for women to come together to help raise the profile of gender and lobby governments to ensure that progress is still being made towards achieving equality between the sexes. Information about policy changes that concern gender need to be made far more accessible. Our vision for Women Connect is to take our work up one level. We want to share information through our network to encourage women's

organisations to work together to lobby governments to ensure that gender equality is being strived for at every level.

This is also of particular importance for hearing the many voices of women. It is our task to support every woman, as her path was already much more difficult than that of her male colleagues. This is true especially as we see the promises made in Lisbon for a social agenda submerged by the economic agenda that invariably affects women disproportionately. As evident from our work the possibility to share lessons and build support for each other is no different from what women were trying to do in Berlin in 1904.

The technology enhances our work, but it's the fundamental way women communicate and network that will and does create change.

For more information

<http://www.womenconnect.org.uk>

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Useful Websites

Association for Progressive Communications
<http://www.apc.org/english/index.shtml>

Beijing Platform for Social Action

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/platform1.htm>

C.E.D.A .W

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

Europe

<http://europa.eu.int/>

<http://www.britainineurope.org.uk/>

European Women's Lobby

<http://www.womenlobby.org/home-en.asp?LangName=english>

Annual Report 2003

http://www.womenlobby.org/PDF/EN_LR.pdf

Equal Opportunities Commission

<http://www.eoc.org.uk/>

Fawcett Society

<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk>

Millennium Development Goals

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

The Women's National Commission

<http://www.thewnc.org.uk/>

National Alliance of Women's Organisations

<http://www.nawo.org.uk/>

Referendums

<http://www.labour-referendum.org/>

Women and Equality Unit

<http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk>

Glossary of Terms

APC	Association for Progressive Communication
CDF	Community Development Foundation

CEDAW	Committee for Elimination of Discrimination against women
EWL	European Women's Lobby
GEM	Gender Evaluation Methodology
ICT	Information Communication Technology
MDG's	Millennium Development Goals
NAWO	National Alliance of Women's Organisations
WNC	Women's National Commission