Women @ Internet:
Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace

Edited by Wendy Harcourt (London, Zed Books, 2000).

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The book pools together a group of experts, from diverse professional backgrounds and cultures, in exploring how the lives of women can be altered by the information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet. The authors reveal how the Net can provide women with an extensive venue to express their views and vocalize their concerns about issues pertaining to women's conditions and human rights.

The late 1990s witnessed the formation of the Women on the Net (WoN) project, created by the Society for International Development (SID), with UNESCO funding. WoN encourages women, from the South and the North, to use the Internet as a political tool, promoting gender perspectives and bringing people together in the shaping of a transnational women's movement. It also aims at creating a resource to be made available for the diversified women's groups, assisting them in developing their Internet usage skills as well as enhancing their benefits from using such a medium of interaction. A group of both women and men, comprising academics, activists and technical people, have joined WoN in cyberspace discussions. Their discussions, ideas, and analysis are further materialized in this book.

Women@internet comprises three parts, all dealing with the various implications that relate to the empowerment of women through the Internet. The first part examines the emergence of women's activism and networking on the Net. The authors explore the potentials that the Internet may offer to women, without ignoring the existing gender inequalities of access to the cyberworld. Arturo Escobar, professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, perceives grassroots activism, particularly that which is channeled through the Internet, as eventually culminating into a form of political resistance in the real world. Gillian Youngs, a lecturer at the Center for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, speaks of 'cyberfeminism', for she sees the Internet as a magnetic arena, bringing together women from across the world to share their experiences and their visions for a better future.

The second part cites instances where women have been using ICTs for global networking as an attempt to promote their rights. Alice Mastrangelo Gittler, whose work focuses heavily on the use of ICTs as a tool for both community-based and global NGO activism, views the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) as a main impetus in launching cyber activism amongst women. She reflects on the successes and weaknesses of the Net in connecting women's NGOs across the world. Nidhi Tandon, an economist and activist from East Africa, shares her knowledge of the work of women's groups in Africa. She provides examples of how these groups are seeking ICTs as tools for change. Edie Farwell, Peregrine Wood, Maureen James and Karen Banks are members of the Women's Networking Support Program of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). The APC Women's Program, initiated in 1993, strives to limit gender inequities relating to access to, and use of, ICTs by women. In this chapter, the authors demonstrate the increasing usage of electronic tools by women, while highlighting the fact that women in the North use Internet tools much more extensively than women in the South and Eastern Europe. They further discuss the reasons attributed to these regional differences, stressing that they are primarily access-related rather than due to women's hesitation in embracing the new technological tools.

The book's last section projects the views of women researchers and NGO activists, presenting case studies from Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Arab World. Laura Agustin, whose work primarily focuses on sex tourism and the migration of Latin American and Caribbean women to Europe, illustrates how the new ICTs can be resourceful survival mechanisms for these women. Delivering ICTs to these groups of women may provide them with the chance of obtaining health assistance, legal advice, as well as human contact; things that are usually inaccessible for women in their situation. Farideh Farhi, member of the editorial board of the Iranian Journal of International Affairs, argues that the West's attitude, until very recently, towards Iran has contributed to a stunted growth of communication and information networks in Iran, without disregarding Iran's wariness of cultural invasion as an additional factor. She explains that although Gulf 2000, an Internet project, offers a vital venue for information provision and dialogue exchange, prevalent circumstances, notably political in nature, deter further development of discussions or action. Farhi also urges activists, who are involved in advocating women's rights, not to underplay the power of religious governments or institutions, even with the existence of an evolving process of modernization.

In the final chapter, Lamis Alshejni, from Yemen and a volunteer for Women in Development Network at SID, stresses that Arab women must take advantage of the new information technologies in their struggle for obtaining their rights and voicing their concerns. She elaborates that although Arab women have been increasingly speaking of and advocating their rights, they "remain silent on the Net." The 'silence' is mostly linked to the fact that Arab women tend to underestimate the platform that the Net may offer them in forwarding their cause. Alshejni, like Farideh Farhi, emphasizes that women should not ignore religious discourse in their advocacy endeavors, especially as religion is inherent to Arab culture. The Net, providing a multicultural and multilingual space, could offer a freer medium for discussing the impact of religion on the status of Arab women. On another level, Alshejni brings to our attention the high illiteracy rate amongst Arab women (at 62%) as a barrier to Internet usage. Nonetheless, she portrays a more positive outlook for the future, noting the shifting literacy rates for young Arab men and women, the increasing Internet usage by Arab women NGOs, and that the Arab world has recently reflected one of the highest growth rates of Internet use in the world.

Women@internet depicts the multitude of potentials that can be realized through the use of ICTs. Obstacles, financial, technical and cultural, to acquiring and using the new information technologies do exist. Still, the Internet is a medium that could strengthen women's movements across the world, furnishing the possibilities for a positive change in the political and social spheres. This alone is a compelling incentive to overpower prevalent barriers.