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**Synergy Gender and Development  
Environment and Development in the Third World**

## **A Chance To Seize by Women in Francophone Africa**

*par : Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla,  
ENDA-SYNFEV*

*Synergy Gender and Development,  
Environment and Development in the Third World,  
APC Women Program in Africa  
BP 3370, Dakar, Senegal  
[mhms \(a\) enda.sn](mailto:mhms(a)enda.sn)*

A rather disillusioned observation was recently made during a pan-Africa conference (1) : Africa women consider new information and communication technologies as "futuristic" rather than a tool for development to be used today. If initiatives are not taken now to thwart this attitude, activities by women in Africa to promote sustainable development that also benefit them will take event longer. This will be especially true in regions on the continent where English is not the common language.

### **A Recent Tool for Development**

Use of electronic communication is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa compared to other regions. During preparations for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (China), electronic infrastructures almost completely bypassed Africa, except for South Africa. The rest of the continent was "terra incognita" similar to the blank unexplored regions of the world portrayed centuries ago on explorers' maps (2). During preparations for the Beijing Conference, the Synergy Gender and Development team of Environment and Development in the Third World (ENDA-SYNFEV) (3) launched a "Communication for Women" Program in francophone Africa. At this time, no women's organization in francophone Africa was connected to electronic mail, and access to Internet in francophone Africa was practically nonexistent.

This situation highlighted the urgent need that women's groups in francophone Africa be "connected" in order to establish the beginnings of an electronic network. If endogenous initiatives were not implemented, the risk would be that development actions launched through electronic communication would only reinforce the regional tendency to extraversion.

In the three years since the Beijing conference, the situation has greatly evolved. Most of the coastal African countries and a good part of the land-locked nations now have access to Internet. However they all still lag behind in the availability of communication and information technologies. The possibility of Africa integrating itself into cyberspace are much more encouraging than a few years ago, and the continent now has a stake in this medium. But what will be the role of African women in this process, especially those in regions that only recently became connected ?

## **Cyberspace : A New Space for African Women ?**

Although it has become an important component of today's world, cyberspace appears to be only a vague abstraction to the majority of African women. Yet if they are not actors in cyberspace, African women will be affected by it.

Women, including those in Africa, have traditionally been confined to domestic, "private spaces", although they are beginning to conquer public ones. Are we going to let ourselves be marginalized in this new medium ? Fortunately some have ventured into cyberspace and have understood the stakes involved.

"In cyberspace, and in its invisible form of digitized information and messages, certain relations are assumed between people and organizations. It is dynamic and inspiring, it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. There are no borders in cyberspace and it is constantly evolving. However it isn't always welcoming or accessible and is often cold and onerous, hermetic and Westernized. Cyberspace is especially a world of men. It reminds one of a badly organized library humming with conversations that are of little interest.

What can cyberspace offer women ? What will be our place in it ? We haven't been forgotten in this medium, mainly as cyber consumers and cyber-workers on the information highway that is about to invade our lives. If information important to us isn't available, we must produce and publish it. We must also find ways to meet in larger numbers and create networks among ourselves to reinforce, as cyberspace allows it so well, coalitions, strategic alliances and actions.

Women want to be active in the process of developing and structuring cyberspace. The "info-poor" - those without access - will surely suffer discrimination compared to the "info-rich". In fact access to information will be a crucial determining factor that makes the difference, as the world moves into the coming millennium. For these reasons, women activists aim to work for :

- equal access to the knowledge and skills necessary for access to cyberspace and exchanging of digitized information;
- reinforcement of public regulations of cyberspace in order to prevent commercial abuses and violation of individual rights, as well as to guarantee equal access to information; and
- gender equality in the organizations and forums in which decisions are taken about the development, structure and organization of cyberspace. " (4)

In general women have been confined to actions promoting development that are "traditional" and conform to their place" in society : literacy, health, (especially reproductive rights), and income-generating activities. Recently, women have become more involved in areas of public management, by participating in decision-making, politics and good governance, actions for peace, and in the media. However, women are still underrepresented in certain sectors, especially science, technology and information.

Francophone African women have only a modest presence in the area of information and communication technology; for now they are limited to using elementary facilities

given by these tools. The obstacles facing them are enormous, especially when compared to the rest of the population. Women have very high illiteracy rates - especially in languages used for international communication. French, the international language of Francophone Africa is a "minority language" in cyberspace. The cost of access is relatively high for women, who make up the majority of the poor in poor countries. Their additional responsibilities of survival production and reproduction often prevent them from benefiting from an adequate education. In addition, technical support, training and maintenance facilities are not adequate for the needs of many women.

It goes without saying that in that context, francophone African women are strikingly absent from the spheres where decisions and initiatives are undertaken concerning information and communication technology policy and equipment. They also lack information about international events that would be of interest to them, and therefore have little possibility of playing a role in them.

At the same time, it is obvious that efforts must be prioritized in this direction on the part of donors and policy makers, governments and especially by women and their organizations. Today, there is a consensus that educating women is a central necessity for development and fighting poverty - as much as for environmental preservation for future generations. Women, and especially women's organizations working for sustainable development, make up the major category of potential "strategic users" of information and communication technology.

### **From the Tool to the Contents**

Even after tacking these primary obstacles linked to access, use of electronic communication by francophone African women shouldn't be taken for granted. Solving the basic problems that limit women's access to cyberspace - illiteracy, prohibitive costs, lack of equipment and access to technical formation - won't guarantee that women are actively going to use information technology. This is one of the lessons learned from the activity of the private electronic conference **femmes-afrique**, established after the training workshop on electronic communication for women organized in February 1996 by ENDA-SYNFEV in Dakar. The electronic list membership hasn't stopped since.

When analyzing the activities of the electronic conference, the facilitators noticed that individual women and women's organizations used the basic functions of electronic communication for interpersonal communication (from one individual or organization to another one) rather than for collective communication (from one to many). In this way, women are confining themselves to a passive role as receivers of information coming from the outside rather than playing an active role in producing and diffusing their own information about their activities, their concerns and their context.

The crucial issue of endogenous production of information is continuously highlighted by organizations working for sustainable development through information technologies. It is stressed that the content of information made available is much more important than the constant development of sophisticated new tools (6). Mastering the technology is an important step, but beyond that new possibilities must be explored, and be used for the advancement of women's agendas. The

"Communication for Women" program in Francophone Africa hope to develop useful activities that are action oriented in this way.

### **From Access to Action, one step forward**

Women in francophone Africa need to access to new information and communication technologies because these will allow them to change the level at which they communicate and are able to act. With these technologies, one adopts a new perspective on the world: one lives locally but becomes more aware of what is going on globally. In turn, this knowledge helps to transform one's local actions.

The main issue is not - as some still think today - of deciding if it is worth adopting these new technologies or not. Just like globalization, no one has the choice of deciding whether to be involved in such a process. These technologies will influence our lives whether we accept to use them or not. For this reason instead of fearing them, African women should consider how the new information and communication technologies can allow us to change the world and to contribute to determining our own future.

In Dakar, October 1998, the "Communication for Women" Program has organized another action in that line, around the issue of "organizing and participating to electronic solidarity campaigns for women's groups in Africa (7). This activity demonstrated that electronic communication and information tools can help, being used wisely, to change the situation of women, by increasing awareness, international solidarity and possibility to change locally with global support. The Mid-Term Assessment of the Beijing Platform for Action five years after the United Nations World Conference on Women will provide a new impetus for actions in the field of using electronic communication for the advancement of women's agenda.

### **Notes**

1. Eight Summary, AFR-FEM Virtual Working Group organized by World Bank (March-June 1998) around the 40th Anniversary Conference of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa "African Women and Economic Development, investing our future", Addis-Ababa, 28 April -1st May 1998. Web archived on: <http://www.globalknowledge.org>.
2. See for instance the map of Association for Progressive Communication, a network of electronic networks active for development worldwide, dated November 1994.
3. ENDA-SYNFEV, "Synergy Gender and Development" is a team of ENDA Third World, an international non governmental whose headquarters are in Dakar, Senegal. The "Communication for Women" Program is implemented since 1995 by ENDA-SYNFEV for promoting the use of electronic communication by women's groups in francophone Africa. ENDA is a member of Association for Progressive Communication, and ENDA-SYNFEV is coordinating the Africa regional program of the APC Women's Program. More information on ENDA on <http://www.enda.sn>, and on ENDA-SYNFEV: <http://www.enda.sn/synfev/synfev.htm>.
4. "Atelier de formation en Communication électronique pour les femmes d'Afrique francophone", Dakar, February 1996, in collaboration with World

Association for Christian Communication, Women's Networks Support Program of Association for Progressive Communication, PADIS-ECA.

5. Translated and adapted from : Maja van der Velden ([maja \(a\) xs4all.nl](mailto:maja(a)xs4all.nl)), with her kind authorization.
6. **femmes-afrique**, private electronic conference of the Health and Rights for Francophone African Women Network, links the women's organizations active in the fields of health and rights in francophone Africa. It was launched in 1996 in collaboration with Women In Development Europe, and presently connects more than 40 groups, diffusing about 30 messages per month. **femmes-afrique-info**, a twin electronic information service is open to anyone interested to receive information in French about women in Africa. **Contact** : [synfev \(a\) enda.sn](mailto:synfev(a)enda.sn) or <http://www.enda.sn/synfev/fainfo.htm>
7. Communiqué, Association for Progressive Communication (APC) Africa Network, Conference on "Global Connectivity in Africa" (ECA, Addis-Ababa, 2 - 4 June 1998).
8. The documentation on this workshop and its follow-up is available on <http://www.enda.sn/synfev/solidarite/solindex.htm>