

Harnessing Information and Communication Technology to Build an Online Community of Northern/Rural Women

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Le "Réseau des femmes du Nord" est un réseau Internet qui utilise les TIC (techniques informatiques de communication) pour joindre les femmes dans les communautés rurales du nord de la Colombie-Britannique autour des problèmes qui les concernent. Ce puissant outil de communication est en voie de transformer la vie des femmes rurales du Nord.

Northern British Columbia (BC) is a vast geographic area covering almost 600,000 square kilometres, with a population density of less than one person per square kilometre. Less than 50 per cent of the 300,000 people residing in northern BC live in communities with a population of more than 10,000 people with the remaining living in communities of less than 5,000 people (Province of British Columbia). Given its geography, demographic features, and lack of proximity to the lower mainland, receiving appropriate health and social services in northern BC can be a challenge. Regardless of geographical location, women already face a disproportionately negative impact from poverty, violence, and economic inequality (Lippman, 1998; Lock, 1998). For northern women, this challenging situation is further complicated by geographic, social, and cultural isolation; lack of access to basic needs, appropriate housing and employment; uncertain resource-based economies; and lack of appropriate health and social services (Leipert; Leipert and Reutter 2005; Madrid). In fact, women living in the North, have a life expectancy that is four years less than their southern counterparts (British Columbia Provincial Health Officer). The detrimental effect of these negative factors increases manifold when coupled with issues related to culture, sexual orientation, ability/disability, age and race (Leipert and Reutter 1998). To further compound the situation, recent (and ongoing) government cuts to health and other social services have caused increased hardship for many northern and rural communities in British Columbia.

To overcome obstacles related to inequality and injus-

tice resulting from living in a northern/rural setting, a group of women from across northern BC have come together to develop the Women North Network (WNN)—a primarily web-based network that harnesses information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool to connect women around issues of common concern. WNN allows women, who might otherwise have no way of coming together, to share experiences, information, and resources. Its formation has made it possible to build an online community aimed at addressing rural women's issues by overcoming barriers (e.g., distance, climate, prohibitive travel costs or non-existent public transportation, etc.) that isolate women in their geographic community—barriers that tend to confine and limit focus to local (often crisis oriented) concerns. Through connecting across the region, women are coming to recognize that local concerns about the health and well-being of their communities and families have larger structural, systemic implications that need to be addressed collectively and beyond narrow geographic confines.

Addressing the Digital Divide and its Gender Gap

In harnessing ICT as a means to address women's concerns, the WNN recognizes and confronts the "digital divide"—a divide that results in certain sections of the population (including women and those living in rural communities) experiencing unequal access to technology and the infrastructure that supports its use (Eckdahl and Trojer). A goal of the WNN is to tackle barriers to ICT that are intimately related to the difficulties women face in other economic and social spheres as well as to their limited role in developing social policy and in influencing broader societal attitudes. Unequal access is the outcome of a complex interaction of gender issues, power relations and multiple social and political factors that support or deter access to ICT and the internet. There is no single digital divide, but rather a complicated set of divides that

interact and intersect (Huyer; Eckdahl and Trojer). These divides do not occur “just” in cyberspace or “just” in real space, but rather they occur in both physical and virtual space. They exist locally and globally, replicating and reproducing the same inequalities and oppressions that continue to marginalize and exclude women (Escobar). The digital divide is a complex set of social and economic factors that separate those who benefit from ICT and those who do not (Eckdahl and Trojer). The gender, cultural, ethnic, social and political power relations that exist in “real” space, exist in cyberspace. Furthermore,

often results from women living and working in circumstances where they are expected to use older, slower equipment and software (Virnoche). Furthermore, women are forced to cope with little technical training and support and with little encouragement to take the time to explore the ways in which ICTs might augment their lives and work. The WNN was established on the fundamental principle that it is important to build on the expertise that women develop through working together to problem-solve issues related to technology. Valuing and including this experience will influence the process and content

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technology is influenced by political and commercial interests that have often not been in the interest of furthering social justice and equality. The WNN provides a political “virtual space” for women to utilize technology to attain their social justice and equality goals while working to redress the impacts of the digital divide.

Women have less access to the technology, skills, and knowledge required to use ICTs (Huyer and Carr, 2002); in particular, their access to the resources necessary to facilitate and support the use of the internet is limited. Specifically, women lack economic resources, adequate time to learn computer skills and then to use them, computer time in the home, and appropriate technical support (Pollock and Sutton). Socio-economic factors such as education, age, income, race, employment status, and marital status are factors that complicate this *gender gap* (Bimber). The network recognizes and strives to create solutions to address geographic location, isolation, and disability that when coupled with other socio-economic factors further alienate some women from the opportunity to enhance their lives through access to the opportunities offered by ICT. The gender gap also involves a predominance of male content on the internet, a focus on male needs in technology development, and an adherence to male values and styles of communication and expression that exclude women and discourage women from exploring the internet or using other ICTs (Bimber; Spender). Gender issues and the complexities of the digital divide in northern, rural and remote communities are further complicated by the dominance of male-oriented attitudes, lack of high-quality employment, assumptions about gendered roles, and beliefs that rural women are not interested in technology.

The gender gap is frequently not so much about women not liking or not wanting to use technology, but rather

development of ICT (Virnoche, 2001). The WNN empowers and supports women to create women-centred ICT spaces and practices aimed at developing technology in ways that build on their strengths and expertise and that are responsive to women’s diverse and unique needs.

On one level, the WNN addresses issues of the digital divide for women in northern, rural, and remote communities by breaking down assumptions about women’s capacity to utilize and influence ICT. Of necessity, collective strategies to address the complexities of the digital divide also involve promoting women’s equality and social justice. The WNN has taken a lead role in achieving this aim through increasing awareness of, and building on the strength and capacity of, women in northern BC to improve their lives and consequently that of their families and their communities. With an emphasis on increasing women’s role in influencing ICT and in advocating for increased ICT infrastructure in rural communities, an integral part of the work of the WNN involves redressing structural, systemic inequality that results in unjust social conditions such as poverty and lack of access to education and employment. In short, the WNN strives to develop a critical analysis of specific issues of the digital divide for women in northern, rural and remote communities including discerning who is left out and how to include them in all aspects of the further development of the network.

Women North Harnesses ICT

Technology is a practical means for the WNN to promote and assist collaboration amongst its members. Although it poses a number of challenges on balance, ICT provides a cost effective approach to bring women in northern BC together in a virtual community. It affords



Circle dancing under the northern sky after a day of Women North community consultations.

women a unique way to create the valued, supportive relationships that are so important in their lives and that are so integral to exploring common issues of concern as well as working towards individual and collective action for change. These relationships are growing into an online community that enhances community organizing and builds alliances between organizations and communities. Rooted in a feminist approach, the WNN is an example of an internet-based network that values and embraces women's lived experience and facilitates consciousness-raising through sharing stories, expertise, and information as a means for women to explore and understand their world, and to create change collaboratively (Balka). It provides women from diverse communities with an increased awareness that they face similar issues, while at the same time creating conditions for women to join together and develop strategies to tackle these issues of mutual concern.

Most people are aware that ICT refers to information and communication systems—both hardware (equipment) and software (programs and applications required to use the equipment) including phone, facsimile machines, voice mail, computers, the internet and electronic mail (email). Fewer people understand that ICT also includes the “organizational, informational and human contexts that are required for its functioning” (Scott 411). Women North Network is a growing part of that critical human and organizational context and is harnessing the power of ICT to enhance the collaborative efforts of northern women. Scarlett Pollock and Jo Sutton describe this as an “electronic strategy”—one that employs ICT as

a means to further the goals of women's organizations and that includes a focus on advocating for women's increased access to technology.

The Women North Electronic Strategy

The network was initially established through a community-based, participatory project funded by Status of Women Canada—one that was designed, administered, and implemented by Northern FIRE: The Centre for Women's Health Research at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). Through a process of consultation at community gatherings in ten communities across northern British Columbia, women discussed and strategized about issues related to health for themselves, their families, and their communities. In addition to discussing women's ways of networking and collaborating locally, regionally, and provincially, an inventory of individual, organizational, and community skills, resources, and expertise was compiled from the information provided by women in each community. By becoming part of the network, a community of women from diverse geographical locations and experiences has been increasingly able to collaborate and organize in order to improve individual and community wellbeing by: (1) influencing and developing health and social policy; (2) initiating joint research and community capacity building projects; and (3) sharing information, skills, knowledge, and local strategies for addressing particular issues such as violence against women, poverty, and inequality (Hemingway, Fiske and McLennan; Rodrigues).

Currently, the WNN is maintained, on a volunteer basis, by a group of women primarily from the Social Work Program at UNBC and from community-based women's organizations. The electronic strategy components include a website, an email news mail list, and an Online Gathering Space available through the Web Course Tool (WebCT) distributive (distance education) learning program at UNBC. The WNN Website is accessible to the public on the internet at the following web address: <http://www3.telus.net/public/wnn/>. In addition to featuring resources of interest to northern/rural women (e.g., news and events, relevant documents and newsletters, links to valued websites), the WNN website includes a history of the network along with detailed instructions for joining the email list and a tutorial for those wanting to access the WNN WebCT Online Gathering Space. The WNN Email News List is a distribution list that disseminates news and informational messages, through email, to network members who are primarily women from communities in northern BC. Materials include information about health and wellness topics, social and political announcements, notices about local and regional events, electronic newsletters, and web links to other resources. Most materials that are circulated originate from network members or from other women-serving and community-based organizations. The WebCT Online Gathering Space feature of the WNN is a password protected place for women to communicate, share information, and resources, and to engage in discussions related to health, social policy, and practice issues for women. Specifically, it facilitates one-to-one and one-to-many discussions and live chats; provides private and public online work spaces for community projects; includes a community events calendar, an A to Z Health List, women-centred electronic documents and websites and searchable member profiles; and, finally, hosts a large number of discussion forums on topics initiated by network members.

WNN Creates a Forum for Opening Doors

A recent study (McLennan) has underlined that, although women have multiple roles and responsibilities and often feel overwhelmed and burdened, they appreciate having the opportunity and capacity to communicate with other women in similar circumstances through email, discussion forums and chat sessions. The WNN provides them with the opportunity to choose from among its various features the ones that are most effective and appropriate in relation to their own experience, their varying access to computers and internet, and the time they have available. At present, the most popular component of the WNN electronic strategy is the WNN Email News List. Daily, a volunteer coordinator forwards to the entire network announcements, news items, invitations, and informational articles submitted for circulation by WNN members. In this way, email list subscribers are able

to access information and resources that are up-to-date and that have daily significance to them. Further, both the website and the WebCT Online Gathering Space offer downloadable documents on a wide range of topics and provide links to news items and websites of interest. As well, by accessing searchable profiles of each network member on the password protected Gathering Space, women are able to locate and contact other women with similar interests and concerns or who have skills and expertise that they can draw on for personal or professional support and development. Groups of women interested in similar issues create private forums for discussion and exploration. For example, the *C-Section Writing Group* currently uses the WNN WebCT Online Gathering Space to meet and collectively write about their experiences with the aim of generating an anthology of accounts related to caesarean birthing in northern, rural, and remote communities.

Through the network, women have the opportunity to advocate for change that will improve their lives. As women explore similar experiences and issues, they utilize the features offered through the WNN to create a collective voice; bringing together women who historically have little opportunity to meet and organize with each other (Hemingway, Fiske and McLennan). Recognizing that collectively they have unique strengths, skills, and resources, the WNN members share strategies that have been effective in their local communities with women in distant communities who are grappling with similar concerns. They seek to work together to have an influence on health and social policies that do not meet the distinctive needs of northern/rural peoples. Through collaboration they are creating a stronger voice in a region that has traditionally been ignored and seen as inconsequential within the larger objectives of policy makers and governing bodies who seem more concerned with issues of people living in the more populated urban areas.

Recently a group of women (participating in a graduate thesis research study that was conducted using the WNN) organized the *Hearts from the Heartland Campaign*. This action strategy focused on sending "heartfelt" messages from the "heartland" (a term coined by the current neo-liberal government for the rural and northern regions of the province) to those in power in Victoria. The idea arose out of concern that the government was not hearing the voices or concerns of its non-urban citizens nor recognizing and building on their strengths or meeting their needs. Some ideas for initiating and implementing the strategy in various communities were explored. A draft version of an informational flyer was generated and shared with all participants for feedback and revisions; updates on the progress of the campaign were provided and templates and samples of heart-shaped messages were distributed. This was done using the various options provided by the WebCT space (McLennan). Additionally a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council project, *Voices of*

Women: Caregiving and Shelter During Economic Decline, is utilizing the communication and information sharing features of the WNN as it seeks to explore caregiving and housing issues for women in four northern, rural communities. Through involving women in envisioning, developing and implementing these kinds of projects and action strategies, the WNN opens doors for women to move their local achievements to a larger regional, provincial, and national arena.

Looking to the Future

Although the Women North Network and its electronic strategy are in the early stages of development, the network has already had a positive impact on the lives of rural women in northern BC and beyond. Information sharing is becoming almost instantaneous; an online community is developing and the network is becoming an important resource for women-centred projects. The WNN is poised to become a primary means for a dispersed northern population of women to communicate and to take action to make positive change for themselves, their families, and their communities.

A key element in bringing the potential of the WNN to fruition is the simultaneous advance of critical aspects of the network that are currently being utilized, the discovery and development of new ways to use Women North and the inclusion of a diverse range of women in the process. Further, by identifying and overcoming exclusionary factors that are preventing women from engaging in this electronic community, women from across this vast region will increasingly have access to the ICT infrastructure. Finally, as women in northern communities become an integral force in using and shaping ICT through collaborative efforts such as the Women North Network, ICT will increasingly become a powerful tool for communicating and transforming the lives of northern and rural women.

A resident of northern British Columbia for nearly ten years, Dawn Hemingway is currently a Social Work professor and adjunct professor to the Community Health Sciences program at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, BC, Canada. Her teaching and research interests include northern/remote health and quality of life, disability issues, aging, social policy development, community-based organizing and research. An activist in the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and '70s, Dawn is currently advisory committee member for the Women's Affiliate of the Canadian Health Network and the BC Women's Education Consortium as well as a spokesperson for the Active Voice Community Coalition and the Northern Women's Forum.

A long-time resident of and community activist from Northern British Columbia, Christina McLennan received her BSW from the University of Victoria and MSW from the

University of Northern BC. Approaching individual and community wellness from a women-centred, health promotion perspective, Christina is passionate about the right of northern and rural women and their families to experience healthy lives. She is particularly interested in the role of information and communication technology in rural social work advocacy and practice.

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What Child Comes Back

Sitting on a bench waiting,
he watches her approach, arms empty now of
flowers,
his distant grave brighter
in the late afternoon sun. Neither have words
to say why they are here. They meet

and walk away on new mown grass, through
trees,
past monuments, around the quieter inset
stones,
and the harsh newly turned mounds,
some bearing testimony to that tender
housekeeping.

They turn together,
He, with an arm around her shoulders,
head bending towards her hand as she
reaches up
to touch his cheek, to straighten the collar
at his neck.

To wait, to tend, to walk and turn.
To dig, to place a stone, to touch.
To die at once, or piece by piece.
We have no choice of memories

Formerly a counselor and group leader at York University's Counselling and Development Centre, Ann Carson also taught adult learning theory for adults returning to the university. Later, as a psychotherapist in private practice, she specialized in life-stage transitions, and in art as a healing process. Ann has recently put together Shadow's Light, a collection of her early and new poems. Her prose essay, The Way We Live, to be published in 2006, highlights how family stories shape our lives while her current project is a collection of stories based on the invisibility of old age.