



# Women Connect!

The Power of Communications to Improve Women's Lives





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Young Women's Christian Association  
Zimbabwe Women's Bureau  
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### Uganda

Akina Mama wa Afrika  
Association of Uganda Women Medical Doctors  
Forum for African Women Educationalists, Uganda  
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Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange  
National Association of Women's Organisations in Uganda  
Safe Motherhood Initiatives  
Society of Women and AIDS in Africa--Uganda  
Uganda Media Women's Association  
Uganda Private Midwives Association  
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### Zambia

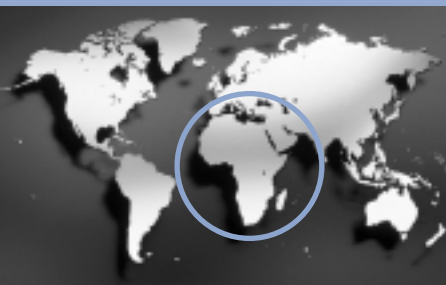
KARA Counseling  
NGO Coordinating Committee  
National Women's Lobby Group  
Young Women's Christian Association  
Zambia Association for Research and Development  
Zambia National Association of Disabled Women  
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# *WOMEN CONNECT!*

**The Power of Communications to  
Improve Women's Lives**

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### Introduction

Faced with limited financial resources in an era of increasing social challenges, women's organizations in developing nations must find ways to utilize both traditional media to reach local audiences and information communications technology (ICT) for broader audiences, in order to get their messages out and improve women's health and well-being.

In 1999 the Pacific Institute for Women's Health launched *Women Connect!*, an innovative three-year program designed to strengthen the ability of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Africa to communicate more effectively. The initiative assisted these groups in using traditional media (posters and brochures), mass media (newspapers, radio, magazines and television) and ICT (e-mail and the Internet) to communicate and advocate for causes they deemed important, such as women's sexual and reproductive health, inheritance rights for women and the reduction of all forms of violence.

*Women Connect!* was carried out with 30 NGOs in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda, but the lessons learned apply to women's groups throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America. Our experience has shown that, with assistance and support, these groups can strengthen their ability to use the power of communications to improve women's lives.

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## Pacific Institute for Women’s Health

### Mission Statement

The Pacific Institute for Women’s Health improves the sexual and reproductive health and well-being of women and girls, locally and globally, with an emphasis on:

- Access to contraception;
- Access to safe abortion and reduction of unsafe abortion;
- Prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS; and
- Reduction of gender-based violence.

The Pacific Institute works through advocacy, training, community involvement, evaluation and applied research.

The Pacific Institute bases its work on the following principles:

- Women’s rights are human rights, and women’s health is a human right.
- Efforts to improve women’s and girls’ health and well-being must go beyond the treatment of disease to address the many conditions affecting their lives.
- A diversity of participants, views and opinions is critical to the success of the Pacific Institute’s mission.
- Collaborative and respectful relationships must characterize all of the Pacific Institute’s activities.
- Findings from the Pacific Institute’s work must be shared – with collaborators and more widely so as to influence public policy.



**“We get so involved with our own internal issues that we forget to link up.”**

National Association of Women’s Organizations in Uganda

**“Most organizations are familiar with the art, but not with the science of communications.”**

Titus Moetsabi, *Women Connect!* project facilitator, Zimbabwe

## Why Work With Women’s NGOs?

Over the last 20 years, more and more women’s groups worldwide have joined to advocate for a range of social and political causes. Recognizing that sexual and reproductive health challenges – such as unintended pregnancy, maternal morbidity and mortality, HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence – demand the involvement of civil society organizations with strong community ties, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo formally identified women’s NGOs as essential to both the empowerment of women and the improvement of women’s health.

The importance of women’s NGOs was confirmed by the Pacific Institute for Women’s Health through a multi-country study, “Evaluation of the Family Planning Impact of the Global Fund for Women.”<sup>1</sup> In gauging the impact of women’s groups on local communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Pacific Institute found that they: 1) are essential to women’s empowerment, which affects reproductive health and behavior; 2) complement government programs by serving marginalized women facing complex issues of poverty and violence; and 3) help generate policy and legal changes necessary both for women’s empowerment and the advancement of society.

Despite their commitment to local and regional issues, women’s NGOs in developing countries have had limited capacity to communicate effectively about their work, often because they lack resources and are isolated from other groups. This isolation has only intensified during the Information Age, which has left many NGOs on the wrong side of the digital divide.

And while grassroots organizations have used traditional media, such as posters and brochures, to communicate with local audiences, our research indicated that they sometimes don’t use media strategically to change attitudes. To be successful, communications campaigns must include audience research, message and media pre-testing and evaluation, as well as the input of target communities. Yet many groups continue to spend limited, precious resources on outreach, without knowing whether their efforts are having the desired effect



# T-shirts to Web Links

It was against this backdrop that the Pacific Institute launched *Women Connect!*, a three-year program designed to strengthen the ability of 30 women's NGOs in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda to communicate more effectively. We chose Africa for several reasons, not least being the presence of an active, enthusiastic women's movement advocating for sexual and reproductive health and rights. And while a handful of Internet projects had recently been launched to help narrow a gaping digital divide, all focused on the mechanics of ICT rather than on strategies to enhance NGOs. Finally, the Pacific Institute already had established ties to a wide range of women's organizations throughout the region.



*Women Connect!*, including its pilot project, was carried out between 1997 and 2002 by the Pacific Institute and the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California. Our goal was to contribute to women's empowerment through collaboration, communications, training and information sharing, and to help women's organizations strengthen their ability to achieve their own objectives, especially in the areas of women's health and well-being.

### ***Women Connect!* Objectives**

#### **Health**

**To strengthen the capacity of women's NGOs to improve the health of women in their communities, especially sexual and reproductive health;**

#### **Media**

**To provide technical assistance to women's NGOs in the strategic use of communications tools for effective publicity, outreach and advocacy;**

#### **Information Communications Technology**

**To increase the technical capacity of women's NGOs and to contribute to the use of ICT for the advancement of women's health and well-being;**

#### **Networking**

**To expand the collaborative relationships among women's NGOs and peer support organizations in Africa and elsewhere.**





**“What *Women Connect!* did was to plant a seed that can be watered and cultivated. There is no going back.”**

Musasa Project, Zimbabwe

**“What I liked about the process is that the funds came after training of staff, so that they could put their ideas into practice.”**

Debbie Serwadda,  
Hope After Rape, Uganda

*Women Connect!* assisted women’s groups in using traditional media, mass media (radio, newspapers, magazines and television) and ICT (e-mail and the Internet) to communicate and advocate for causes they deemed important, such as women’s sexual and reproductive health, inheritance rights for women and the reduction of all forms of violence. The initiative combined training and technical assistance with small project grants, allowing participants to put new knowledge into action.

Taking the view that only by strengthening a broad range of communications capacities can an organization maximize its impact, we designed *Women Connect!* with the following complementary activities:

### Needs Assessments

Our in-country feasibility studies indicated that women’s group place reproductive health within a broad range of concerns, including safe motherhood, protection from all forms of violence and socio-economic advancement. Among groups focused on health issues, most were combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while also working to prevent other sexually transmitted infections and maternal mortality. A total of 30 organizations, all having both an explicit emphasis on health in their work and a desire to develop communications strategies, were invited to participate in the *Women Connect!* initiative.

### Training: Media Strategy and ICT Workshops

We identified a leading NGO in each country that could link us to a network of grassroots women’s groups and co-host our media strategy and ICT workshops. We also selected several local professionals to serve as trainers and co-facilitators in the workshops. The workshops were held over four days – two spent on media strategies and campaigns and two on ICT – followed by discussions to gauge feedback and assist in developing a small grants proposal.

### Small Grants Initiative

Recognizing that, without funding, many NGOs simply are unable to initiate new activities, we introduced a small grants initiative. In total, the Pacific Institute awarded \$121,500 (in grants ranging from \$3,000 to \$5,000) to participating groups for one-year projects based on some aspect of communications covered in training. We encouraged each grantee to approach the project as an opportunity to take small but important steps toward capacity building by adopting media and technical skills. We hired a local consultant in each country to oversee and facilitate the progress of all groups.





## Technical Assistance

*Women Connect!* provided individually tailored project assistance to each group through local project facilitators, as well as on-site visits and ongoing e-mail correspondence from the U.S. project staff.

## Distribution of Health Information and Materials

Based on the needs and literacy levels of the communities served by our partners, the Pacific Institute offered each group a large collection of the latest health- and advocacy-related materials, as well as a list of health information web sites and resource materials about effective communications strategies for community-based organizations (CBOs).

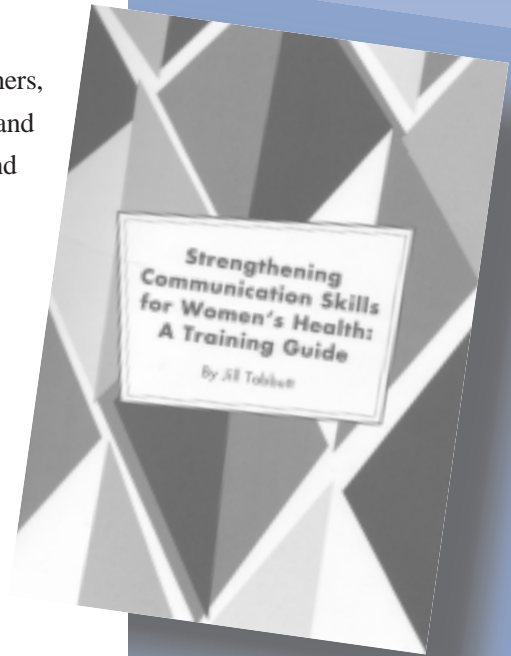
## Sustainability

Because we recognized the importance of the small grants in allowing NGOs to implement new communications skills, we approached the Global Fund for Women to offer additional support beyond the first year's activities. The Global Fund re-granted the majority of *Women Connect!* groups in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Zambia for further communications work. In the last two years, some European donors also have launched initiatives in communications strategies, though on a limited scale. We are confident that there is an enabling environment for the work we've begun, and that NGOs can leverage their experience to attract additional funding.

## Evaluation

We used a variety of methods throughout *Women Connect!* to evaluate and document progress, including workshop and mid-term evaluations, as well as case studies written by three participating groups. In addition, we brought in a communications specialist to conduct a final external evaluation with two main objectives:

- To document lessons learned from the *Women Connect!* experience that are relevant to the broader objective of enhancing communications skills for the advancement of women's health and well-being.
- To provide the Pacific Institute – as a Northern NGO that became a grant maker to Southern (and specifically African) NGOs for the first time – feedback on how it can work more effectively in providing technical assistance that responds appropriately to their needs.



**“Thanks for taking the time to come and ensure that women’s organizations in Africa do not get left behind.”**

*Women Connect!* participant,  
Harare, Zimbabwe



**“I am now empowered to do even better campaigns!”**

*Women Connect!* participant,  
Harare, Zimbabwe

### Getting the Word Out

Media projects funded by the *Women Connect!* small grants yielded the following benefits:

**Campaigns:** Eight organizations conducted campaigns on topics including reproductive health, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS and dispelling gender stereotypes.

**Publications:** Two organizations worked with rural communities to produce a newsletter and an outreach training manual with a strong emphasis on gender and health.

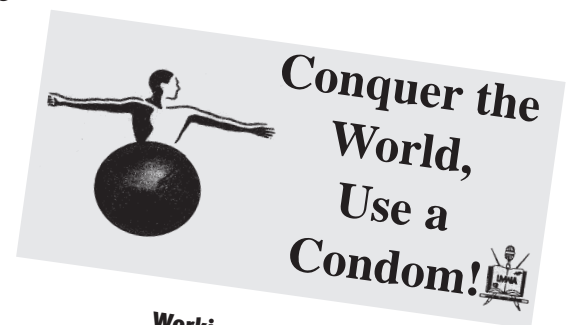
**Calendars:** The Zambia Association for Research and Development created a motivational calendar featuring women and men in non-traditional professions as a way of broadening perspectives on gender roles.

## Using Media Tools To Advance Women’s Health

From previous work with women’s NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it was clear that their communications reach often did not match their eagerness to address local and regional concerns. As the following case studies suggest, *Women Connect!* bolstered media strategy skills by working with these groups to define their messages, audiences and media choices, and to develop the organizational resources to evaluate and sustain their work.

**The Federation of African Media Women Zimbabwe (FAMWZ)** has a network of rural radio clubs that bring women together for discussions about such topics as farming techniques, health and property rights. With the help of *Women Connect!*, FAMWZ took this network to another level by having club members produce a local-language newsletter, one that the women were committed to because it enabled them to speak in their own voices. Project coordinator Ednah Bhala said that participants were especially excited that the newsletter might ultimately help them by being distributed to local authorities and service providers. FAMWZ requested articles on subjects including family planning, the importance of pre-natal care, nutrition and protection from HIV infection. The response was overwhelming – more than 80 articles and poems were submitted for the first issue. In addition to allowing rural Zimbabweans to join in the development process, the newsletter motivated participants to enhance their literacy and writing skills.

**The Uganda Media Women’s Association (UMWA)** has launched a strategy to provide teenage girls with sexual and reproductive health information. The reasons are compelling – with prostitution, teenage pregnancy and HIV infection impacting poor youth at alarming rates, intervention is paramount. With Pacific Institute funding, UMWA carried out a media campaign involving 14-19 year-old adolescents in a Kampala area slum.



**Working with UMWA, teenagers in Kampala created this safe-sex poster**



The project needs assessment was followed by a workshop in which more than 100 teenagers spoke candidly about their socio-economic situation. As documented in the UMWA newsletter, some teens “... resort to prostitution as a way of earning a living. In the process [they] end up getting unwanted pregnancies and STDs, including HIV/AIDS.” Many also said that, because school is so expensive, they drop out, don’t have enough to keep them busy and then become sexually active. Once that happens, they often lack money for contraceptives, or prefer to buy alcohol and drugs to forget their problems. This reality presents a challenge for any public health strategy offering contraceptives that adolescents cannot afford.

After the workshop, the participants helped design messages for T-shirts, caps and posters that were produced and distributed in the community. It was a learning process for UMWA, as the teenagers indicated which messages would resonate with them and which would not. For example, following one group exercise, they designed a T-shirt that read, “Sex? Not Me, I’m a Child.”

The teenagers also stressed that, to be successful, UMWA’s outreach had to sensitize health service providers to the fact that adolescents will not seek sexual or reproductive health services if they are reprimanded or judged. News about the campaign has since spread by word of mouth and youth in other neighborhoods now want to participate. For UMWA, it’s just the beginning of a long process to affect some positive change for Ugandan youth.

### Increasing Access: Information Brokerage

Several *Women Connect!* partners sought to share the program’s resources by creating communications outreach material from downloaded information, a useful measure given the barriers to both direct Internet access and up-to-date information and research.

Organization	Type of Information	Material Produced	Language	Distribution
Association of Uganda Women Medical Doctors	HIV, breast cancer	E-mail newsletter	English;	Other women’s NGOs, health clinics
Safe Motherhood Initiatives	Family planning	Fact sheet	English	Schools, health clinics
Uganda Private Midwives Association	Family planning, reproductive health	Radio programs	Various Ugandan languages	Nationwide
Zambia National Association of Disabled Women	HIV/disability	Brochure	English	Training workshops, members



**“The campaign had largely been one where we talked to ourselves as women or the already ‘converted.’ We realize that we have pointed fingers and not understood people’s problems and realities...There is therefore a strong and urgent need to look at issues from the eyes of the people we are trying to reach.”**

Sheila Kawamara, Uganda  
Women’s Network

## Barriers to Improving Adolescent Sexual & Reproductive Health

Research by the Uganda Media Women’s Association offered some instructive revelations about local barriers to adolescent sexual and reproductive health:

- There is inadequate information about the dangers of early and frequent pregnancy;
- The bulk of messages targeting adolescents warn against substance abuse and abortion;
- Poverty leads to commercial sex, a major contributor to teenage pregnancy in the project area;
- Negative attitudes about offering reproductive health information to adolescents prevents open discussion among teenagers and the community; and
- Condom usage is rare and primarily determined by men.

## Media Evaluation Findings

According to the external evaluator, though one year may be too short and \$5,000 too little for a media campaign to take off, each step opened the door to future possibilities. Participating groups now recognize the value of building a clear communications strategy into all of their program work. By conducting needs assessments, they also have learned how to develop messages that resonate with their target audiences. And thanks to the workshop participation of local public relations and mass media professionals, some groups are more effective in cultivating media relationships and placing stories in local outlets.

Other program elements were more difficult to achieve in the allotted time frame. Most participants confirmed the evaluator’s assertion that “a year is too short a period to run a systematic campaign that includes a needs assessment, [campaign design and execution], and monitoring.” This proved especially true when it came to thinking strategically about multimedia campaigns and broader objectives. Despite their initial enthusiasm for using a combination of media – including booklets, radio, posters and road shows – most groups were hampered by insufficient time, funding and networking. Participants made limited use of local radio, which has the widest potential reach among African women. And only half of the groups had the means to translate their printed materials into local languages.



ACFODE is using T-shirts to change attitudes

## Organizing Women

### The Potential & Challenges of Technology

*Women Connect!* was not alone in bringing ICT to southern women's groups; several donors and northern technical assistance organizations have provided computers and software. Our approach was unique in that it was based on the premise that effective use of ICT requires much more than hardware, software, electricity and a phone line. Because technology is a dramatic innovation for many women's NGOs, we believe it is critical to address how it is incorporated into an organization and to encourage groups to connect with one another.

**The Zambia National Association of Disabled Women (ZNADWO)** is committed to promoting the welfare and voicing the concerns of women with disabilities. It offers seminars and workshops and promotes education, training and employment opportunities. The only NGO without a computer at the time of the training workshops, ZNADWO wrote a proposal and secured funding for a computer from a donor that we identified. With *Women Connect!* funding and technical support, ZNADWO then established an Internet connection and began offering staff training in e-mail and Internet usage, as well as in strategies for conducting health research. The e-mail connection was a major benefit to disabled women, allowing them to learn from similar women's groups in other countries like Zimbabwe and Australia.

As part of our initiative, ZNADWO also repackaged health material from the Internet into a simple hard-copy format suitable for the low literacy levels of its target audience. In January 2001, ZNADWO convened an HIV/AIDS workshop specifically for disabled women, who are often bypassed in any kind of public education campaign on reproductive health because of the assumption that they have no sexual desires.

Through this new connection to the Internet, the world has literally come to the doorstep of ZNADWO's offices. "Can you believe that before [we] had this computer, I used to handwrite letters to international donors?" said executive director Francisca Muyenga.

#### Changes in Attitudes

As part of their ICT initiative, The Zimbabwe Women's Bureau (ZWB) used their local language newsletter to share downloaded health information with more than 2000 people in rural areas. They then hosted community meetings. The following poem, written by a woman in one of the discussion groups, offers evidence that *Women Connect!* reached women on the ground.

Women! Women!  
Please listen to us  
We have learnt about HIV/AIDS  
We know we are the most affected  
By this disease  
We look after the sick  
We have to look after our  
Sick children, husbands, relatives  
And even our husband's relatives

Women! Women!  
ZWB brought us this program  
To teach us about HIV/AIDS  
We want to thank even those  
Who brought the e-mail/Internet  
As this has helped us learnt what  
Others in the world surrounding  
Us are doing about this pandemic  
Women, let us not blame ourselves  
Our children, our husbands and our  
Relatives if they have this disease  
This disease can come to anyone  
You can never be too smart  
When it comes to HIV/AIDS

Women! Women!  
Let us go for tests  
It is better for us to know  
Our status than to die ignorant  
When you know your status  
You will know what to do and  
What not to do

Women! Women!  
Let us help each other  
To manage this disease  
Than to let it manage us!

by Petronella Sunguro  
ZWB member, Mutare chapter

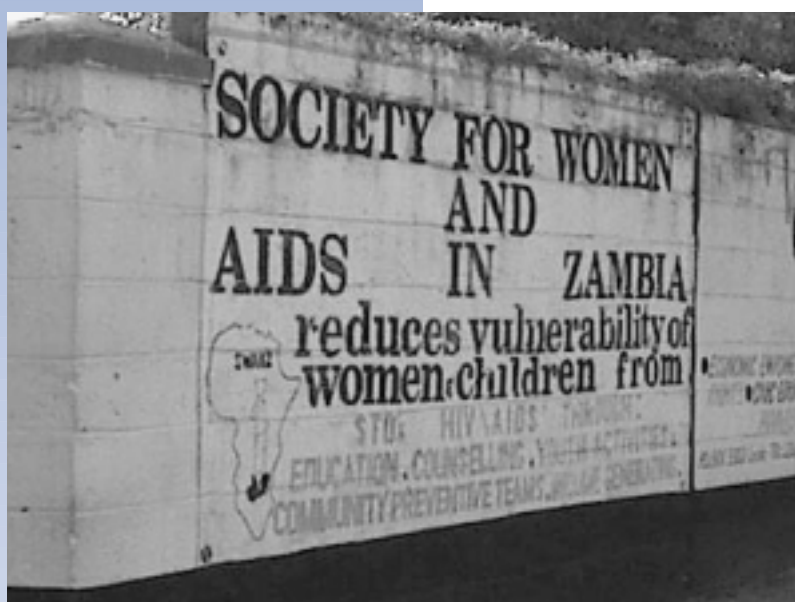




**Society for Women and AIDS-Uganda (SWAAU)** offers a forum for Ugandan women to confront HIV/AIDS-specific problems affecting them and their families. SWAAU empowers women to address the causes and consequences of the epidemic by organizing conferences and circulating information to the local community and to the organization's 28 African chapters. Its work includes implementing policies to reduce women's risks for HIV/AIDS, advocating for women's social and economic development, and giving women support to cope with AIDS and its impact.

With Pacific Institute funding, SWAAU enhanced its technological capacity in order to strengthen its ability to address HIV/AIDS in Uganda. Project activities included: e-mail and Internet connectivity; staff training in ICT skills; set-up of a

SWAAU web page; and documenting success stories on AIDS care and HIV prevention. The project was particularly timely as SWAAU was responsible for convening the eighth international SWAA conference in April 2001. Invitations were sent to 1900 people around the globe, 40 percent of whom registered online. Now SWAAU is sharing more information about its work and uploading educational outreach success stories onto the web site, [www.maxpages.com/swaauganda](http://www.maxpages.com/swaauganda).



**“We would like to proudly report that we are now connected!”**

Zambia National Association of Disabled Women

### Internet Cafés

As part of *Women Connect!*, two groups became the first NGOs in their countries to launch Internet cafés that focus on training for women, women's groups and female Parliamentarians. Isis-WICCE, an international NGO headquartered in Uganda, opened its Internet café with support from the Pacific Institute after some years of planning. The Zimbabwe Women's Resource Center and Network (ZWRCN) already had purchased its computers and developed a business plan when we launched *Women Connect!* Project funding paid for computer networking, e-mail and Internet subscriptions and technical support, as well as some training expenses and marketing.

For both organizations, the cafés were a dream come true, a place where women could come to work comfortably without the intimidation of more male-dominated settings. The two cafés also charge significantly less than commercial



sites, making it easier for women with limited finances. Technical support is offered by able female staff, who are adept at assisting clients in locating a wide range of information on the Internet, be it local and international news, career counseling, health data, educational sites, or extracurricular interests.

However, the long-term goal of café managers is to build the skill levels of clients so that they can use the Internet to advocate for social change. Isis-WICCE and ZWRCN are gradually enhancing their training programs to demonstrate how women's groups can lobby and raise their voices for change in the areas of gender violence, gender dynamics in health, gender discrimination in property laws, and other concerns. As ZWRCN expressed at the *Women Connect!* evaluation workshop in January 2002, the next stage of work is "to focus on how the Internet can impact the lives of women. There is an opportunity for the Internet to play a role in advocacy, especially to reach policymakers and to host discussion groups among concerned NGOs and advocates."

## ICT Evaluation Findings

For nine participating NGOs, *Women Connect!* made the difference between being connected and not being connected, launching them into a new world that might have been closed for many years. Women's groups in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda now are using the Internet to link more effectively with one another and the outside world. Project partners better understand the multiple applications of ICT and the need to be careful in making choices. Many are reducing costs by using e-mail in place of long-distance phones and faxes.

Perhaps the most tangible benefit of connectivity has been in enhancing regional and international links. In fact, all five groups that developed websites cited their value in attracting the attention of donors. "The website has put the organization on the international map in that anyone can get to know us from any part of the world," said Thoko Ngwenya of Musasa Project in Zimbabwe.

**"The *Women Connect!* grant came when we needed it most. It helped us to realize the dream that we had for a long time. It was a small amount, but it benefited a large number."**

Juliet Were, ISIS WICCE, Uganda





**“Before the *Women Connect!* training workshop, e-mail was just a word. *Women Connect!* came at the right time. We were behind with information [communications] technology. We grasped the chance to work with them. *Women Connect!* has kick-started us in the ICT era.”**

Constance Chenjerai, Zimbabwe  
Women’s Bureau

## The Biggest Library on Earth

The Forum for African Women’s Educationalists Uganda (FAWEU) found a wealth of resources on the Internet that it downloaded and distributed to young women in rural schools. Materials produced in this way included *Adolescent Health Issues*, *Life Sciences of the Human Body* and *Abuse and How Bad it Can be to Adolescents*. “The greatest lesson learned,” FAWEU said in its final report, “is that the Internet can now be extended to school girls in the remotest parts of rural Uganda, even where national television cannot reach because of the unavailability of infrastructure such as electricity.”

Because ICT is a new area, we learned that a longer training period would have better enabled groups to deal with strategic questions about its implementation and use. Introducing new technology into any organization, whether in developing or Western countries, can place pressure on systems, relationships and management styles. Organizations also are challenged to adapt ICT into their activities in a way that strengthens their impact. One of the greatest challenges *Women Connect!* faced was convincing groups that this adoption must be gradual so as not to overwhelm organizational resources.

Another lesson learned was that senior managers needed to be engaged over a longer period of time about strategic ICT issues, which we made an effort to address by hosting briefing luncheons for executive directors in Zambia and Uganda.

At a policy level, *Women Connect!* did not address the broader question of women’s access to technology. This represents the next phase of action for participating groups now that they have become familiar with ICT and its possibilities.



# Best Practices for Working More Effectively with Women's NGOs

## Erring on the Side of Flexibility

Before launching *Women Connect!*, we debated the extent to which health, and specifically sexual and reproductive health, should be emphasized. On the one hand, we knew that it would be easier to find funding for work related to sexual and reproductive health rather than to improving the status of women more generally.

On the other hand, we did not want to impose an agenda on participating women's organizations that would sway them from their mission or goals. We also knew that, for women living in and on the margins of poverty, women's health was linked to other concerns, including access to food and clean water, protection from violence and inheritance rights. The decision thus was to include a focus on women's health, but with a willingness to let that be interpreted very broadly, i.e. as "health and well-being."

We have reflected on the evaluator's assertion that "*Women Connect!* walked a perpetual tightrope between not wishing to be prescriptive and at the same time ensuring a realistic set of options.... In an effort to achieve the former, the program ran the risk of losing focus and effectiveness." Perhaps we could have achieved greater focus, efficiency and impact by:

1. Working with fewer organizations to allow for more funding and individual attention;
2. Clustering groups for collaboration around shared interests; and
3. Contracting the local project facilitators to work more closely with participants as trainers.

**"*Women Connect!* has been a very user-friendly program. The fact that donors come to the ground is important. We have donors who live in Kampala who have not even come to see what we do. It is very important for donors to come to the ground, to know what the problems are and how they can be resolved."**

Uganda Media Women's Association





**“Contact with *Women Connect!* was very good. The relationship went beyond that of a donor and recipient. Musasa Project and *Women Connect!* were a team during the implementation of the project. *Women Connect!* was able to give us advice whenever it was required and this was always welcome.”**

Musasa Project, Zimbabwe

## The Benefits of Small Grants

The participating NGOs stressed how important the small grants were in allowing them to implement the workshop training. Although mistakes may have been made along the way, this learning by doing probably constituted the most important capacity building in *Women Connect!* And while all of the participants had suggestions for improvement, most were very positive about what they accomplished with the money. Debbie Serwadda, program coordinator for Hope After Rape in Uganda, had this to say:

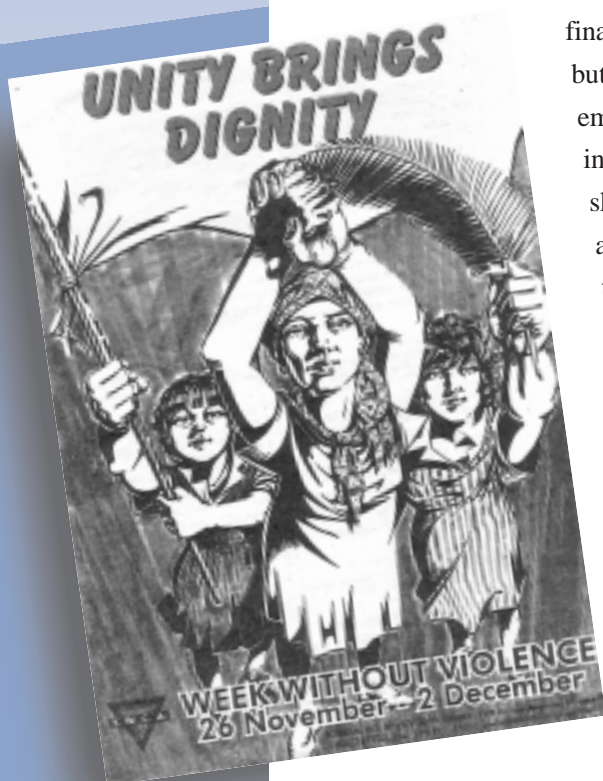
“There was a culture of investing in us from the start... This small grant project has completely revolutionized our lives! Oh, the excitement to just sit at a desk and be able to access information from as far as Australia! My personal and networking skills have already been enhanced ...”

## The Importance of Technical Assistance

Technical support in the *Women Connect!* program came from the in-country project facilitator and consultants and from the California-based project team. We worked hard to find local African specialists who could act as trainers and

technical advisors, assist in project monitoring and conduct a final evaluation. This approach was not only cost effective, but consistent with our goal of devolving responsibility and empowering local experts. We had varying levels of success in each country finding people with the necessary blend of skills, from consultants who provided excellent technical assistance, to those who simply monitored adherence to timelines and budgets, to those who missed appointments and neglected contractual duties. Nevertheless, this was an important complement to the U.S.-based team.

While the training workshops and technical support helped improve skills among project partners, staff turnover of about 35 percent at the NGOs limited the immediate benefits. Additionally, the program could have been designed to reinforce learning throughout the span of the project.



**YWCA Zimbabwe developed this poster as part of their annual street campaign against violence**

One possible approach, in the evaluator's view, would have been for grantees to draw up a strategy, followed by periodic training to gauge progress, reinforce learning and acquire new skills. In this way, technical assistance would be supplemented by long-term training, while still providing space for oversight and management.

## Networking and Collaboration

We found that while women's NGOs are interested in more structured networking to avoid duplication and to work more strategically, they often operate in a context of competing agendas, lack of trust and limited resources. If networking does occur, it is typically crisis-driven rather than the result of sustained collaboration. For instance, women in Lusaka, Zambia came together to pressure police about investigating a series of murders of young girls; however such alliances are rare.

In light of this, we felt that communications could go a long way toward helping these organizations achieve their goals through networking with like-minded groups. Nevertheless, there were some missed opportunities for collaboration throughout the *Women Connect!* initiative.

Despite these challenges, the landscape is gradually changing; in general, our partners within the same city now know about each other's activities in more detail and have identified areas where they overlap and can collaborate. They communicate through e-mail frequently and attend strategy meetings that, in the past, were missed because of slow postal service. In Zimbabwe and Uganda, groups have used online advocacy to bring attention to arrests of women activists, traditional customs that violate girls' human rights and biased media portrayals by foreign agencies.

Our attempt to work through existing umbrella organizations to foster networking was quite challenging. Often umbrella organizations have competing priorities, such as the same funding source, or staff shortages. Thus, while it may be helpful to involve them, they should not be seen as providing an ideal structure for extending project benefits to other organizations.



### Forging New Alliances

**With the encouragement of *Women Connect!*, two organizations in Zimbabwe worked together effectively to launch a media campaign on reducing violence against women during “16 Days of Activism,” an annual advocacy event to highlight gender-based violence. The groups divided the labor: the YWCA produced drama and print media and organized an essay contest and community march, while Musasa produced radio programs, developed a website, co-hosted a community forum, participated in the march and networked to involve other organizations**





### The Way Forward

While formal implementation of *Women Connect!* has ended, it has set many things in motion. Most of our partner organizations in Africa continue to use their new learning and to share it with other women's groups. Having worked consistently with 30 women's NGOs over the last three years, we can speak about their accomplishments in enhancing women's lives. Having witnessed their challenges and successes, we know that our collaborative efforts in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Uganda illustrate the strides that can be made in other regions facing similar public health and social justice issues.



Based upon our experiences with *Women Connect!*, the Pacific Institute has forged partnerships with women's organizations in Latin America and Asia as well. While this work also blends training, technical assistance and small grants, we departed from the *Women Connect!* model by strategically selecting partners interested in increasing women's knowledge of and access to emergency contraception, a key focus of our current work. As a result, groups are better able to network and share strategies and materials. In addition, these networks of groups are poised to impact sexual and reproductive health policies in their countries and regions. These partnerships have positioned the Pacific Institute to facilitate linkages between Southern women's organizations and international sexual and reproductive health meetings and coalitions.

*Women Connect!* has had additional bearing on the overall program of the Pacific Institute. In particular, it demonstrated the need to include communications skills as part of all training to improve sexual and reproductive health. We are currently integrating elements of *Women Connect!* into some of our work with women's organizations in other African countries, as well as in Latin America, Asia and the United States.

As a result of our grant-making experience with *Women Connect!*, the Pacific Institute launched the Action Grants Program in January 2001 to support many of the NGOs that participate in our capacity building programs.<sup>2</sup> The Action Grants Program is an outgrowth of the Pacific Institute's principal objectives, which are to improve the sexual and reproductive health of women and girls globally, and to support women's and youth-serving organizations worldwide. The grants program supplements our work by providing additional training, technical assistance and



health-related materials to NGOs that work with women and adolescents. NGOs prioritize their own needs and propose a project to benefit their organization and the communities they serve.

The Pacific Institute awarded more than \$100,000 in 2001 to groups in Burkina Faso, El Salvador, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe. We also awarded grants totaling \$30,000 to women's groups in Latin America through funding from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The Action Grants projects have continued into 2002 and include training health workers to integrate emergency contraception into community outreach programs and training adolescents to educate their peers about sexual and reproductive health. A new grant cycle is planned for January of each year.

The Action Grants Program strengthens the effectiveness, impact and sustainability of all Pacific Institute programs, enabling partner organizations to launch new activities based on the training. The Pacific Institute's long-term collaboration with women's groups, youth organizations and research institutions on health and rights initiatives has positioned us to carry out the Action Grants Program effectively. Groups in each of these countries have made it clear: funding is needed to implement and sustain women's health initiatives. Now we have a mechanism to make this happen.

But we do not want to be proprietary with what we have achieved through *Women Connect!* – far from it. Rather, a goal of this report has been to share our experience and information with other organizations – donors, governments and NGOs – and to encourage and, hopefully, inspire them to incorporate the lessons learned from *Women Connect!* into their work with women's NGOs throughout the world.



**“The impact of...*Women Connect!*  
...on our lives and work will be  
increased communication and  
[access to information] to facili-  
tate action and decision-making  
in the areas that are crucial to  
women's health, especially  
reproductive health...”**

Sandra Okoed, Program Officer at  
Akina Mama wa Afrika, Uganda

1. The Global Fund for Women, based in San Francisco, makes grants to seed, support and strengthen women's rights groups in developing countries.
2. The Action Grants Program is supported by the World Bank, the Compton Foundation and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund.



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**Women demonstrating, Harare, Zimbabwe**

**If you would like to receive a copy of the *Women Connect!* evaluation, *Learning to Link*, please contact The Pacific Institute for Women's Health.**

**For a copy of the *Women Connect!* video, "*Stories From Women Connect!*," please contact the Pacific Institute or view footage online at [www.annenberg.edu](http://www.annenberg.edu). To learn more about the *Women Connect!* initiative, please visit the web site at: [www.women-connect.org](http://www.women-connect.org).**

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