

*Reference: O'Donnell, S. (2000) WomensLink - an introduction - and Interview with Patricia Donald. Active Networks Ireland, June.*

## **WomensLink - an introduction - and Interview with Patricia Donald**

Since 1997, WomensLink has been linking up women's organisations and activists in Northern Ireland and the border counties. More than 25 subscribers currently use the Internet mailing list to share news and information and to keep in touch with the "latest biz."

WomensLink was conceived in July 1997 by women at an Internet seminar organised by the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) in Belfast and the VSIA project at Dublin City University (DCU). The following month, WomensLink was born on a DCU server, and over the next two years, the number of subscribers grew from eight to 20. Earlier this year, WomensLink moved to a commercial server, where it continues to expand under the management of the WRDA.

The mailing list software on the server allows every subscriber to send an email to WomensLink which is then automatically distributed to all the other subscribers. The incoming WomensLink message arrives as an ordinary email, and the subscribing women's organisations can either send a response to the whole group or send a personal email to anyone on the list.

Women using WomensLink are administrative workers, coordinators, project workers, information workers, collective members and women not affiliated with any women's organisation but active in the sector. Most of their messages to WomensLink concern news, information and discussion about women's issues and organising in Northern Ireland - everything from upcoming events to news about policy developments in the pipeline. In the early days, there were more discussions about political issues but discussions decreased as the list expanded.

Many WomensLink messages concern information technology, including questions and responses about using advanced Windows features, where to find computer training, and where to buy a cheap computer. In fact, WomensLink has become a useful means of IT support for many of its members, with a request for info or advice generally receiving a quick response from someone else on the list. course, there are also informal friendly messages shared among subscribers. Some WomensLink subscribers work together often in the physical world, but for others, WomensLink is a primary means of keeping in touch with women in the women's sector. The personal information shared on Womenslink reveals a range of experiences from home-based consultants working in isolated rural areas to women working the front lines in the heart of Belfast.

WomensLink is a valuable information source. However a challenge for WomensLink and other Internet-based discussion groups in Northern Ireland is how to encourage open discussion about issues which are rarely discussed in public gatherings. During the transition to the Northern Ireland Assembly at the end of 1999, the newspapers were full

of analysis but the issue was hardly mentioned on WomensLink. WomensLink is seen as a public forum, despite having a friendly and at times intimate feel to it.

Another challenge facing WomensLink is how to manage its growth as more women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the border counties acquire Internet connections and want to join. Mailing lists like WomensLink may soon have to ask themselves whether they should have a maximum number of subscribers or if they can accommodate an unlimited number. There are pros and cons either way - an unlimited list means maximum information exchange, but it may also reduce the subscribers' sense of knowing most of others on the list and discourage them from participating in discussions.

One of the many advantages of WomensLink is that all the subscribers can participate, not only in information sharing and discussions, but also in making decisions about the future of the WomensLink. Although the list is managed by the WRDA, all the subscribers are responsible for contributing to the list, welcoming new members, and making sure that WomensLink continues to be a valuable resource for the women's sector in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

### **An Interview with Patricia Donald, WRDA**

Patricia Donald is the IT Project Worker at the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) in Belfast. The WRDA provides development support to networks of women's organisations in Northern Ireland and is currently working on several cross-border women's development projects.

Patricia is responsible for the IT aspects of the WRDA's programmes and services, including coordinating the WomensLink mailing list and providing IT support, advice and training to WRDA member organisations. She was interviewed in June 2000 by Susan O'Donnell, who co-facilitated the WomensLink mailing list with Patricia until earlier this year, when she analysed WomensLink for her PhD thesis at Dublin City University.

*Susan:* Would you say that email use has taken off in the women's sector in Northern Ireland and the border counties, or is there still some way to go?

*Patricia:* Email usage within the women's sector has definitely increased over the last three years. In 1997, the WRDA was one of the first within the sector to go online. In June that year we held a seminar to see how many women's groups were using email and found about seven women's groups with an Internet connection. Earlier this year, we carried out an IT mapping exercise of Northern Ireland and the border counties and found 47 women's groups with an Internet connection - 38 in Northern Ireland and nine in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

So yes, there has been a huge increase. One reason is that the cost of equipment has fallen dramatically. Modems are much less expensive and new computers usually come with an internal modem. That together with the number of free Internet Service Providers

available makes having an email address much less expensive than it was three years ago, when groups were reluctant to risk spending money from under-resourced budgets on accessing the Internet, especially when they didn't know who else was out there and finding out wasn't top of the list of priorities.

Now that more women's groups are online and can see the benefits of email, other groups are encouraged to go online as well. However Internet access is still a big issue, particularly in rural areas. Women can see the potential of email, particularly in helping to break down isolation, but getting access to a computer and the Internet can be difficult.

*Susan:* Very few organisations in the women's sector have their own Web page, not only in Ireland but internationally. Have you any thoughts about why there are so few women's organisation Web pages, considering the number of women's organisations out there?

*Patricia:* From our own experience it is lack of time. So many women's groups and organisations are so involved with their work on the ground that having the time to do a Web site is almost a luxury. I don't doubt for a minute that groups have the ability to do a Web site - it's finding the time to design and develop the site and then to keep it updated.

Another difficulty I think is accessing relevant and affordable training. High-level training is expensive and usually located in urban areas and often it is not relevant to the group's needs. For example a Web-design training course may use a particular software package that is not accessible to the group wanting to develop a Web site. Again, having a Web site is not seen to be top of the priority list with many groups, especially if many of their members do not have access to the Internet.

*Susan:* Women's organisations spend a lot of time networking but most of that goes on face-to-face. How does WomensLink compare and complement meeting in person?

*Patricia:* WomensLink can never replace face-to-face meeting, the kind of networking that happens when you're queuing for coffee at a conference and you get talking to the women beside you. However I do think it can support and build on that informal networking by offering a quick means of keeping those links alive and building on them. It also offers groups an opportunity to begin making links (of finding each other) before the face-to-face meetings take place.

*Susan:* How do you promote WomensLink in the sector?

*Patricia:* WomensLink is promoted by many of its subscribers - it's seen as a good way for groups to keep in touch with what's going on within the sector, whether that be personal issues such as who has just had a baby, to job opportunities, policy issues or technical IT queries. I always find it a useful tool for groups that are just starting to use email for the first time - it is an immediate link into what other groups are doing and provides a great incentive to check their email every morning. It allows women who are new to email to see what other groups are using email for. We have produced a mouse

mat promoting WomensLink with details of how to subscribe, which we send to all new WomensLink members. We also sent the mouse mat to all 90 of the WRDA's members, which generated a good response particularly from rural groups. The best response has always been by word of mouth, with existing members promoting it - this is a great hook, as new groups want to join because they are afraid of missing something - even if it's only the Friday joke which has become a bit of a WomensLink tradition.

*Susan:* Most of the women's organisations on WomensLink are from Northern Ireland and the links with the border counties are growing slowly. Why are cross-border links slow to grow on the Internet and what can be done to nurture this process?

*Patricia:* I think cross-border links have been slow to grow on the Internet for the same reasons they have been slow to develop on a face-to-face basis. Again, it comes down to lack of resources. The P&R money (Peace and Reconciliation funding) made cross-border work more possible by providing the resources to do it - women were very involved in work on the ground in their own localities and were successfully developing cross-community links. Cross-border work is yet another dimension and again takes time. I think as more face-to-face cross-border work develops, these links will be reflected in the links made on the net. But again many women, particularly in rural areas, don't have access to the net.

Cross-border Internet work needs to be underpinned by training. As part of our own cross-border ICT (information and communication technology) project (funded by NIVT) we recently held two seminars, in Belfast and Monaghan, to look at how ICT tools could support women working on policy issues. We found that women want training on advanced Internet searches, setting up email lists and Web development. They want to be able to use the Internet to make contact quickly with other women working on similar issues, to brainstorm ideas, to be able to share their work with other women and to access statistics and government documents. They also want to use ICT tools to build cross-sectoral communities on the net, such as an equality community for those working on equality issues.

*Susan:* On all Internet mailing lists, some subscribers will contribute more than others, and WomensLink is no exception. What are some of the restraints to participation on WomensLink and how can you encourage women to contribute?

*Patricia:* Restraints include lack of confidence, lack of training and again lack of time. Many of the WomensLink subscribers would tell you that they read all the messages but don't have time to sit down and reply to them or send contributions themselves. Lack of time can be down to not having fast typing skills. For women not used to a keyboard, such as some development workers, sending a message can be time-consuming and laborious.

Also, many of the women on WomensLink know each other and work quite closely with each other in other areas of their work. This is reflected in some of the Womenslink messages, and can make the list seem quite cliquey, which may be off-putting for other

women. For new subscribers I think it takes a while to suss out the whole culture of the list. Another difficulty is that often there is only one computer in a group or organization which has Internet access and is therefore not always available for use.

*Susan:* One of the challenges of a mailing list is that as it expands to include more subscribers, a sense of closeness can be lost, and new subscribers may not know the more atmosphere on WomensLink without it turning into a clique?

*Patricia:* This is a difficult one. I think the more subscribers you have, the nature of the messages changes - messages are less personal because all the subscribers don't know or haven't met one another face-to-face. I think the fact that many of the groups and women do work together on a range of issues within the sector helps to maintain a friendly atmosphere on WomensLink. Also when the groups come together for a WomensLink event, it contributes to the sense of community on-line as there is always a flurry of activity afterwards.

Women like to know who they are talking to, even in cyberspace. I think the reason for a group wanting to join WomensLink contributes to the atmosphere - if groups join because they want to be part of an on-line community then they are more likely to participate whereas if we were just to collect a list of all the email addresses in the women's sector and add them to WomensLink groups wouldn't have the same sense of commitment and belonging. The members of WomensLink are going to have to address this issue in the future: Is there an upper limit on the number of subscribers? How do you be inclusive while restricting the number of members? Do we need a limit at all? Will it change the friendly atmosphere if we don't have a limit?

*Susan:* It can be difficult for anyone working for a community-based organisation in Northern Ireland to speak publicly about political issues. Is it possible to have more of will continue to be discussed in private?

*Patricia:* I think there are a lot of complex reasons for this which the last 30 years has contributed to. There is a fear of offending someone when you don't know everyone who is on WomensLink, and also you don't know who is reading the messages. I also think women are reluctant to send a message about their political views to WomensLink which can be printed out in black and white.

Also, as community development workers we learn not to push our own party political views. I also think we have to differentiate between "Politics" with a large "P" and "politics" with a small "p". I think women here get on with the politics with the small "p" and do speak out about these issues but are frustrated by the Politics with the large "P". I think if women speak out publicly about a Political issue there is a fear that their views may be seen to represent the group or organization with whom they are associated. Within the WomensLink membership, for most of us it is our group or organisation which is the member and not the individual.

Also I think there is a culture of self-censorship here and not wanting to be the first to stick our heads over the parapet. Safety (which has been ingrained in us all) is another issue. Maybe as we come out of the last 30 years we will be able to discuss Political issues more freely.

*Susan:* When the Internet came onto the scene in the women's sector, there was a lot of talk about global networking but these links are growing very slowly. What are some of the difficulties with using mailing lists to link local and global women's organisations?

*Patricia:* Again I think it comes down to lack of resources and time. It takes time to develop links and to network and many of us find it difficult to make that time. Also using the Internet is still not seen by many groups as a priority. We still need a lot of awareness raising and training. Many groups wouldn't know how to find other groups on the net and as you said yourself many women's groups don't have an on-line presence so it's a bit of a Catch 22. I think we will begin to make more links as we create more of an on-line presence, and that will begin to happen as more women have access to the net and can see its potential for collective action.

An example would be the recent equality Web site that we created for women responding to equality schemes in the North. The women involved in this piece of work wanted a quick and efficient way to share the responsibility of the work, brainstorm ideas and put their work up for comment and suggestions. We had the tools to create a discussion Web site with a place for women to post their draft responses. I think the Web site has been a success because its users designed it, we had the tools to create it and again the women had the skills to use it.

*Susan:* What is your favourite aspect of WomensLink?

*Patricia:* I think it's wonderful when a woman or a group posts a question or is looking for information and others respond with ideas and solution's. Its great that we are starting to make cross border links on the list - I know the Donegal Women's Network was able to put a group in Belfast in touch with Mother & Toddler groups in Donegal for an exchange visit.

I also like the fact that while the WRDA co-ordinates (as in provides the technical support, adding new members, etc.), the list belongs its members. WomensLink began as a list for women's groups in Northern Ireland, then with the agreement of all the members it was opened up to women activists in the women's sector and then again with further agreement it expanded to include groups in the southern border counties.

*Susan:* Where do you see WomensLink going in the future?

*Patricia:* I see it continuing to grow, and hopefully with more participation as women's confidence on the net grows. I would see WomensLink as a springboard for other work on the Web, for example women using it as a place to make links with other women working on similar issues and then using other Internet tools to take that work forward,

whether it be creating another mailing list for the purposes of that work specifically or maybe a Web site, whatever is appropriate. In this way I think WomensLink can help to create, nurture and encourage more of an on-line presence for women in cyberspace - one that is interactive and participatory, not just about women being passive browsers and shoppers!