

# Making sense of the Internet

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## IIAV- a missionary move for women

If one has ever been to Amsterdam, and visit the library of the International Information Centre and Archives of the Women's Movement (IIAV – [www.iiav.nl](http://www.iiav.nl)), one will find it in a part of the town where mostly people who migrated to Holland from Turkey, Suriname and Morocco live. In the middle of this cosmopolitan part of the city is a big old church that looks more like a Turkish mosque rather than a Catholic church. But it is no longer a church, it has been renovated and now houses the IIAV.

The IIAV 's mission is to make knowledge relating to the position of women available and accessible and to promote research that will contribute to the quality of women's lives. It's history is not unlike that of the building where one stores the books and magazines, photo archives and archives, and where one can have offices from where one can coordinate for alliances and build its websites.

The women who started the IIAV 70 years ago knew that the books and papers, documents and research they had collected in the course of their successful women's suffrage campaign would be useful in the future campaigns. The IIAV now preserves hundreds of such documentations and archives.

## IIAV's mode of operation

As time went by the mission probably changed very little, but the way the work being executed definitely did. It is now able to present the information on the Internet. Information seekers in Asia, Africa and Latin America can access one's information using the same tools and, as quickly as women in the Netherlands. The information is presented in Dutch and English. But very importantly, the new technologies

made it possible to work with women's information organisations throughout the globe. More information is available now than ever before, and Internet and eMail have become key instruments in creating information that makes a difference for women.

In this article three different projects are looked at where the IIAV is involved. Though different in all three, ICT4D plays an important role. Yet, it is the difference what makes the sense! When developing each of the projects, the first question asked was: what is needed? The next question was: what makes sense to do? And the third question was: is the same being done/doing is what needed?

## Women's Information Technology Transfer (WITT)

Women's organisations in central and eastern Europe were not well represented on Internet when the IIAV and its partners in the region surveyed the situation in 2002. Most women's organisations did not have a web site. Many of those that did only had a page – and that was more to make them visible to potential funders. Internet was certainly not being used in their strategical interventions. But many women's activists had seen how women's organisations in western Europe were effectively using ICTs in their information strategies. In 2001 a Belgrade based women's organisation requested for a training from European and North American Women Action, an alliance in which the IIAV was active, in using ICTs. The trainers of that training, and the women being trained, became the early leaders of what is now known as WITT ([www.witt-project.net](http://www.witt-project.net)).

From those early beginnings, WITT has developed a training methodology. The primary tool is the 'needs assessment' that

the trainers make before each training. By knowing exactly what the women in the training know and don't know, and what they want to do, the trainers can deliver a three day training that completely meets the needs of the women in the session. Lenka Simerska of the Czech Republic, a trainer with WITT, says of the WITT training she recently organised "WITT didn't want to just provide skills, we wanted to provide understanding as well. We wanted to empower the participant's choice of tools."

WITT Executive Director Christina Haralanova, says the trainings achieve something fundamental every time. "They link the technology that women use to the policy framing it. This nice blend of theory and practice is meant to help women make informed decisions about technology solutions for their organisations." In this way, WITT is helping women's organisations throughout the region to discover which ICTs make sense in their own specific context.

### Shahrazad News

Shahrazad News ([www.shahrazadnews.org](http://www.shahrazadnews.org)) is an independent news organisation run for and, by Iranian women. It began its daily news production in July 2006. Shahrazad News aims at promoting media diversity, freedom of expression and the promotion of human rights in Iran. Its focus is on the power of Iranian women in a society where Islamic laws, regulations and traditions have denied women a voice and limited their freedom of expression both in public life and the media. Shahrazad News will produce and publish independent, reliable and high quality news and information on the Internet, in Farsi and English, on issues that affect the lives of women in Iran.

The IIAV was part of the beginnings of this project. The editor in chief of Shahrazad News, Mina Saadadi, was a former project worker at the IIAV. Herself a political refugee from Iran, as she worked to develop WITT she asked herself the question: What do one need in Iran? What have one got? What are the possibilities? She and many of her friends knew there was too little access to 'free' information in Iran, that women had very little freedom, that many Iranian women living all over the world wanted information and some of them can provide information. She also knew the IIAV is a massive clearing house of information from around the world, and anyone wanting to write articles needs only to tap into the IIAV as a resource. By creating a cooperation between the Dutch Radio Training Centre (RNTC), the IIAV and her own volunteer journalist activity Dokhtarak, Mina was able to realise a tremendously ambitious project. It has been set up for a two year period and hopefully, if proved successful, can be continued, providing feminist news to Iran.

If one is wondering where the name Shahrazad News came from: one may already aware of the classic Persian story 'One Thousand and One Nights'. Married to the cuckolded king who murders successive wives after their honeymoon night, the young bride Shahrazad uses her powers of story telling to weave a tale so intriguing, so hypnotising, that the king repeatedly postpones her execution in order to hear the next spell-binding serialised chunk, night after night. Using the power of words, Shahrazad thus breaks the cycle of violence and oppression suffered by her predecessors.

### Know How Conference 2006

The IIAV has been working with colleagues throughout the world to develop projects in which ICT tools play a significant role. To facilitate this work, the IIAV has been a driving force behind the Know How Community ([www.knowhowcommunity.org](http://www.knowhowcommunity.org)) since 1998. The Know How Community consists of women's information and communication organisations throughout the world. Some are libraries, others are online documentation and news centres and, training organisations and media organisations. The community meets once every four years in a space it defines itself – 'the members see each other regularly at meetings they attend with the purpose of informing others.' The Know How Conference represents the convergence between the professions of the participants and their commitment to human rights and women's rights. The Know How Conference provides a context for evaluating their work of collecting, repackaging and disseminating women's information in the context of women's rights and human rights.

The Know How Conference 2006 was organised by PUEG, the gender studies department at the Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. How did the Know How Conference address the issue of 'what makes sense'? Organiser Felix Barrientos Martinez says "The information landscape has changed tremendously. When we refer to women's information nowadays, we are talking about all media, including film, radio and the Internet. That is why all of these media were given a place in the Know How 2006 programme."

Over fifty percent of the participants in the conference came from Latin America, and many of these were indigenous women. From January 15<sup>th</sup> to the end of February 2006, the Know How Secretariat and the Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas (Southern Region) managed an online discussion on indigenous women, ICTs and the information society. This online discussion was used by the 175 participants as preparation for face-to-face discussions to be held at the Know How Conference 2006. "We received a lot of responses and valuable testimonies on how ICTs are having a specific impact on indigenous women's lives," says Nidia Bustillos Rodriguez, moderator of the online discussion and active in the Know How Secretariat. Indigenous women may get involved in ICTs slowly, but the process of inclusion has started. They are aware of the importance of ICTs for improving their enjoyment of their human rights. On the one hand, the possibilities for finding work, sharing ideas and exchanging experiences and suggestions grow, together with being heard. The difficulties, on the other hand, are related to the limited access these women have to computers and to the Internet. They also have to struggle with taboos, 'machismo', lack of time, money and training, and lack of information that fits their needs. ■

*WITT is up for organising trainings throughout the European region. Contact WITT through [christina@consultant.bg](mailto:christina@consultant.bg) or via the website.*

*For more information on any of these projects and activities, follow the links provided in this article or write to [info@iiau.nl](mailto:info@iiau.nl).*

*Join the Know How discussion list by sending a message to [listserv@nic.surfnet.nl](mailto:listserv@nic.surfnet.nl), with the following message, 'Your first name Your last name'. (i.e. Join Knowhowconf Lin McDevitt-Pugh in my case)*