

# Women's on-line activism

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Women's on-line activism is generally just one of the ways to promote other forms of public work aiming to improve the social status of women. However, unlike other forms of activism, which are limited by time and space, on-line activism knows no temporal or physical boundaries. Because of the fast communication, transfer, search and presentation of information (8 fibres thick optical wires can, in just 1 second, transfer the amount of information that can fill 90 000 encyclopaedias) and the opportunities for expression and/or promotion, networking, coordinated campaigns, petitions and lobbying, the Internet transcends the possibilities of other forms of public work and activism.

The advantages of the new technology lie in the possibilities offered by no other medium: non-stop access to all information with simultaneous participation in providing information and/or lobbying for changes. It is clear that the inability to control information can lead to various forms of abuse, but the advantages of the Internet as a unique media space available to all by far outweigh its negative aspects.

Women's NGOs have used various forms of Internet communication since the beginning of the 1990s, when its development began. Many consider the year 1995 to be the turning point in the development of Internet as a tool for the promotion of the women's movement. During the preparations for the Beijing Conference (1995 United Nations World Conference on Women – UNWCW), women were the first to use e-mail correspondence to share information, lobby and organize campaigns, which paved the way for future use of the Internet in their activist work. Today women all around the world create mailing lists and web pages and participate in on-line working groups and discussions, combining traditional technology with Internet.

Women's organizations from all parts of the world create and maintain web pages, where they express and promote their opinions, participate in the work of other women with whom they share their beliefs, organize and participate in seminars, workshops and conferences, search for and exchange

information, create databases for easier and faster access to information, design and implement programs for women's self-empowerment, mobilize women in women's human rights' campaigns, provide direct and reliable information and support, and actively lobby for changes on the national, regional and global level.

## Women's online activism around the world

The Internet enables us to access information that might otherwise remain unavailable and/or marginalized in the media, which had, before the development of the Internet, been common practice to prevent global public campaigns and mobilization of women's activism. For example, due to the Internet, women around the world found out how women in Afghanistan live and suffer under the Taliban regime, and began to distribute information about the RAWA organization (Revolutionary Action of Women of Afghanistan – [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org)) and sign the petition for help and support to Afghan women before their human rights became the focus of political interest. Although other media lost interest in the rights of women in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime (this media silence about the Afghan women could have given us the impression that all their problems had been solved, first-hand experiences of the women themselves, distributed on the Internet, showed that the reality is completely different). On the web pages of RAWA – the oldest political and social organization of Afghan women fighting for peace, freedom, democracy and women's human rights in Afghanistan – we can find information about the real lives of these women. They continue to be raped, exposed to threats and pushed into unwanted marriages, there is a growing number of suicides and self-inflammation among women, and of arseny in girls' schools, it is still dangerous to go out of the house alone, women are forbidden to sing on the radio or TV, a growing number of young girls and women are left with no other alternative than to beg, prostitute themselves and engage in other forms of torture and sexual discrimination. This kind of information is necessary for productive and influential women's activist work.

Another example of women's online activism is connected with the case of Amina Lawal ([www.amnesty.org.uk/action/aminalawal.shtml](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/action/aminalawal.shtml)), a Nigerian Muslim woman who was, according to domestic law, found guilty for adultery in March 2002, after she gave birth to a child outside of marriage. She was sentenced to death by stoning! Amina filed an appeal with the help of a Nigerian women's human rights group. On the Internet, numerous

campaigns and petitions were initiated in order to save Amina from a horrifying death and influence the changes in the legislation that punishes adultery in a way that violates international standards. The petition initiated by Amnesty International included over 1,6 million signatures that were submitted to the Nigerian representative in the United Nations. Amina was saved. However, this doesn't mean that rescue actions and lobbying for changes of cruel and inhuman laws is no longer necessary. The Internet remains an important medium for warning against discrimination and for activist work, because, unfortunately, there are many cases similar to that of Amina Lawal – if this law doesn't change, the same sentence awaits many more women.

We could say that the Internet makes it impossible to cover up information and/or prevent its diffusion, which is prerequisite for any effective activist work.

## The visibility of women's activism on the Internet

Web pages enable women to mentor other women, and their efforts become practical examples for newcomers. This is especially important for the empowerment of women because it gives them a sense of continuity, reliability and self-confidence.

From the very beginning, women's NGOs from all parts of the world have recognized the importance of availability of and access to information on the Internet and began to create their own web pages. Web pages of one of the oldest and largest feminist organizations in America, NOW (National Organization of Women/Nacionalny organizacija žena – [www.now.org](http://www.now.org)), offer information that can be used by women's organizations around the world as a guideline in their activist struggle. One of the oldest feminist and activist organizations in Europe, Les Penelopes ([www.penelopes.org](http://www.penelopes.org)) is also one of the most advanced in using new technologies in activist work, media promotion and dissemination of information, and on their web pages you can find out what is happening at conferences around the world. Two of the oldest feminist journals, *Ms.* [www.ms magazine.com](http://www.ms magazine.com) and *Off Our Backs* [www.offourbacks.org](http://www.offourbacks.org), publish articles, interviews, calls to actions, useful links and other information on the Internet, for those that cannot subscribe to their printed editions.

## Networking

In addition to self-promotion on web pages and dissemination of information about various forms of activist work and their results, women's organization can connect via Internet (networking) for the purpose of joint action. Some of these organizations are ENAWA, European and North American Women Action ([www.enawa.org](http://www.enawa.org)), whose members from various parts of the world exchange information about the position of women in their countries, publish reports and news about the status of women, initiate actions and petitions and encourage women to join them, and organize trainings, seminars and workshops; Karat Coalition ([www.karat.org](http://www.karat.org)), a regional coalition of NGOs and individuals from 20 Central and South East European countries advocating gender equality; NEWW – Network of East West Women ([www.neww.org](http://www.neww.org)), a network of women from East and West founded in 1991 with the aim of strengthening activists and women's NGOs in Central and East Europe and newly founded independent countries of the Russian Federation, raising awareness of gender issues and influencing political decisions that affect women; European Women's Lobby ([www.womenlobby.org](http://www.womenlobby.org)), a coordinating body consisting of women's NGOs from the European Union (both those on the national level and on the level of the European Union), with more than 3,000 members in 15 member countries, whose goal is to achieve equality of men and women in Europe and to connect political decision-makers and women's NGOs on the level of the European Union.

## Other forms of women's work online

Women initiate and maintain web pages focusing on particular interest groups in order to establish faster and easier access to and exchange of information related to specific issues. Some examples of those interest groups are: a network of women with special needs, Disabled Women's Network Ontario ([dawn.thot.net](http://dawn.thot.net)), whose web pages contain many useful information and guidelines on how to take active part in the activities of all handicapped women; a group of young women dealing with problems of teenage girls on web pages of Teenvoices ([www.teenvoices.com](http://www.teenvoices.com)) under the motto «Because you are more than just a pretty face»; and New Moon Publishing ([www.newmoon.org](http://www.newmoon.org)), a magazine created by girls aged 8-12 for their female peers. Women over 50 ([www.wo50.com](http://www.wo50.com)) deal with interests and problems of women over 50, and on web pages of Neatwomen –

[www.neatwomeninc.com](http://www.neatwomeninc.com) – you can find topics interesting to women “who are too young to be too old”.

Big-sized women, who are not acceptable as desirable and valuable in the today's social climate, have joined together and presented their world-views on the Internet to show that they exist, that they are worthy and that they don't deserve a marginalized social role. Web pages of HUGS – [www.-hugs.com](http://www.-hugs.com) and OVERCOMING EATING [www.overcomingovereating.com](http://www.overcomingovereating.com) are dedicated to fighting against stereotypes about women whose weight exceeds that of a fashion model, with the aim of empowering women and preventing exhausting and unhealthy dieting. One of the best activist sites, which promotes self-confidence of women and girls of all ages, sizes, races and backgrounds through media education and activism, is About Face ([www.about-face.org](http://www.about-face.org)). Minority women can also express themselves and raise their voices on the Internet – web pages of Roma women, [www.-romawomen.ro](http://www.-romawomen.ro), were initiated with the aim of improving the status of Roma women in Romania. Business women also help and support each other through the Business Women's Network, [www.bwni.com](http://www.bwni.com).

Databases, directories, and browsers for a variety of women's issues are available to all regardless of who founded them and where: Women Human Rights Resources ([www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/diana](http://www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/diana)) , IIAV – International Information Center and Archives for the Women's Movement ([www.iiav.nl/eng/iiav/index.html](http://www.iiav.nl/eng/iiav/index.html)) , Gender Inn ([www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/datenbank/e\\_index.htm](http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/datenbank/e_index.htm)) , Women's Issues ([womensissues.about.-com](http://womensissues.about.-com)), Gender Information Exchange ([www.genie.ids.ac.uk](http://www.genie.ids.ac.uk)); Feminist Majority Foundation Online ([www.feminist.org](http://www.feminist.org)).

Networks are not limited only to feminists and activists dedicated to a specific goal of changing the position of women on the national, regional and global level. They are also open to women who have recognized the possibilities of the Internet in networking for companionship, travel or self-education. One such network is Women Welcome Women ([www.-womenwelcomewomen.org.uk](http://www.-womenwelcomewomen.org.uk)), which includes women from all parts of the world who want to travel. Any woman from any country of the world regardless of her nationality, religion or standard of living can become a member. It is enough to send an e-mail to a woman living in the country you are travelling to, ask her for help, encouragement and advice once you get there or even cut the accommodation expenses since many network members offer this possibility as well.

## Discrimination on the grounds of language and standard of living

According to the data on the web page <http://www.gltreach.com/globstats/>, 680 million people in the world today have an Internet connection (September 2003). Although it is believed that English is the language that rules the Internet, statistical data prove to the contrary. Out of the total number of people with access to the Internet, 35,6% of them are people from English-speaking countries, and 64,4% of them don't speak English (Chinese account for 12,2%, Japanese 9,5%, Spanish 8% and Germans 7%).

Women's online activism is not a prerogative of women from the more advanced countries or those speaking the most widespread languages such as English, French or German. The most comprehensive web page with a list of women's NGOs from all around the world can be found at <http://womensissues.about.com/cs/thirdworld/>. Here you can find all the information about the status of women in the countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as a list of women's organizations from countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Malaysia etc.

## Women's online activism in Croatia

At the end of 1994, an electronic women's network ZaMir/Women was formed in the region of former Yugoslavia. It enabled women's NGOs to start collecting, exchanging and disseminating information about their own and others' activities and to initiate international solidarity actions, which is what most Croatian activist NGOs still do to this day. Since e-mail communication is a fast and reliable means of providing information and encouraging joint action, it is one of the most valuable and most frequently used possibilities for networking among women's activists today.

In Croatia, women's NGOs often founded ad hoc networks (for example, Women's Ad Hoc Coalition for monitoring and influencing the elections in 1995, 1997 and 1999/2000, and initiating the petition for legal and safe abortion). National women's NGOs mostly used e-mail communication to distribute and exchange information, and recently, under the umbrella of the Women's Network of Croatia (which includes 40 women's organizations from all parts of Croatia), they presented themselves on the Internet with their own web page: [www.zenska-mreza.hr](http://www.zenska-mreza.hr).

E-mail communication was for a long time the only Internet feature that Croatian women's NGOs used from the beginning. Only later did they rec-

ognize the importance of creating their own web pages on the Internet. Still, a very small number of Croatian women's NGOs have their own web pages. Out of the 40 women's organizations that are members of the Women's Network of Croatia, only a few of them maintain their own web pages: B.a.B.e. women's human rights group ([www.babe.hr](http://www.babe.hr)), CESI ([www.cesi.hr](http://www.cesi.hr)) ([www.sezam-hr.net](http://www.sezam-hr.net)), the Center for Women War Victims ([www.czzr.hr](http://www.czzr.hr)); Korak/Step Karlovac ([www.grupakorak.hr](http://www.grupakorak.hr)), the Center for Women's Studies Zagreb ([www.zenstud.hr](http://www.zenstud.hr)), Women's Infoteka ([www.zinfo.hr](http://www.zinfo.hr)), DEŠA, Dubrovnik ([www.desa-dubrovnik.net](http://www.desa-dubrovnik.net)), Stope nade – Split ([www.stope-nade.com](http://www.stope-nade.com)), LORI (Lesbian organization Rijeka – [www.lori.hr](http://www.lori.hr)), and SOS hotline Virovitica ([www.sosvt.hr](http://www.sosvt.hr)). On the web pages they publish summaries of their activities, goals, photo galleries of public actions, coverpages and information on publications and other promotion materials, information about seminars, conferences and workshops they organized or participated in, press-clipping, calls to action or information about campaigns they conduct.

There are many Croatian women's groups about which there are no available information on the Internet. One of the main reasons is the fact that only a small number of women, including activists, has so far learned the skills of web page design and maintenance. Thus, the majority of hard-working and otherwise successful women's activist organizations struggle with a lack of funds for expensive web page design courses, as well as with stereotypes about the Internet as a "male toy", which men know more about than women and have more time for. Too many women, unfortunately, partly because of lack of time, and partly because of limited funds, tend to agree with the assumption that they are less capable than men to learn how to design and maintain web pages, so they depend on expensive web design agencies. The few activists who did acquire skills of web page design because of their individual interests and affinities are willing to put their knowledge into practice, but because of lack of time and resources, they are not able to transfer their knowledge to others and expand the number of competent female experts for new technologies.

The first Croatian activists who learned how to communicate by e-mail or find information on the Internet are still not familiar with other possibilities the Internet can offer in activist work, for example, initiating online petitions, participating in online conferences, networking, creating databases, organizing online campaigns, conducting public polls, publishing bulletins or newsletters etc. Even when they are able to organize successful campaigns, collected information mostly remain in the archives of the campaign members, which means that they are unavailable to the general pub-

lic or newly founded women's activist groups. The members of the Women's Infoteka were the only ones who managed to learn the skills of creating databases and published the guidelines on their web pages ([www.zinfo.hr](http://www.zinfo.hr)). Since even the pioneers of women's activism were unable to do it, we can hardly expect that a significant progress will be made by those that are just being founded and whose limitations of time, funds and education are even greater.

## **Results of an ad hoc research on the way Croatian women's groups use the Internet**

We asked 11 Croatian women's NGOs to fill out an ad hoc questionnaire about Internet usage. Since these were the oldest and strongest women's organizations, it turned out that they have a large number of computers, 6-11 in each organization, which is not surprising since they have been active for a long time and work in the big towns. Groups from smaller towns that have just begun their activities have 1-2 computers. Computers they own are used by a far greater number of women than those who work there, since many organizations have volunteers, members and students who occasionally come to their offices and use the computers. Organizations establish an Internet connection almost immediately upon their founding, but not on all available computers. Although many of their computers don't have an Internet connection, the members of the organization connect to the Internet on a daily basis. Internet is still mostly used for e-mail communication and systematic search for information. 10 % of the working time is used for web page design, and web pages are only occasionally updated with new information. 1-20% of the time is used for downloading selected information. Six organizations create and maintain their own web pages.

## **Other forms of women's online expression**

On-line activism doesn't include only presentation and organized activity of registered women's NGOs. It also encompasses every activity which actively promotes our own beliefs in an attempt to change or influence reality that surrounds us by using the various possibilities of the Internet. Unlike other advanced countries of the world (US, Canada, Australia, European countries), where many individuals or unregistered women's interest

groups actively distribute and share information related to a particular sphere of life, this form of on-line activism barely exists in Croatia.

Except for women's on-line activism closely related to the social goals of the Croatian women's NGOs, in the Croatian cyberspace there are hardly any examples of web pages on which women's interest groups talk about their problems, achievements, efforts, beliefs, needs etc. For example, the web pages for pregnant women and mothers are not designed and maintained by pregnant women and mothers themselves, but are part of the initiative of hospitals, pharmaceutical companies or associations for the protection of mothers and pregnant women. Recently, the association of mothers, fathers and pregnant women, RODA, that advocates a dignified pregnancy, parenthood and childhood in Croatia, initiated its own web page [www.roda.hr](http://www.roda.hr). Although the male and female members write the texts, they hired a professional company to design and maintain the web pages. The web pages of the Croatian Association of Business Women, KRUG, [www.businesswomen.hr](http://www.businesswomen.hr) (that supports business women – but not only them – for the purpose of helping the Croatian economy) are also designed and updated by a professional agency, although the published contents are arranged by the members themselves. Many other women's interest groups in Croatia (for example, single mothers, obese women, women with special needs, divorced women, older women, teenagers, women suffering from common female illnesses etc.) still don't articulate their own identity on the Internet.

In Croatia, there are only a few web pages of women's interest groups that publish information about their activities. The Center for Education and Counseling of Women (CESI) has initiated, within the framework of its project "Raising awareness on the issues of gender and sex", a unique web site for young people – SEZAM ([www.sezam-hr.net](http://www.sezam-hr.net)) – that brings information about the sexual life of adolescent girls and boys in Croatia.

Although their starting point and goals are art-related, the web site of the Croatian artist Andreja Kulunčić deserves our attention because of the social dimension of her work. She incorporated the Internet in all her artistic projects and installations. You can find information about her projects at the web address [www.andreja.org](http://www.andreja.org). Two of her projects have been created by a direct incorporation of new technology in her artistic work: "Distributive justice" ([www.distributive-justice.com](http://www.distributive-justice.com)) and Embryo – a closed reality ([embryo.inet.hr](http://embryo.inet.hr)).

Lesbian organizations such as the Lesbian organization Rijeka – [www.lori.hr](http://www.lori.hr) – and CRO-Lesbian ([www.cro-lesbian.com](http://www.cro-lesbian.com)) publish information for women in the lesbian community.

While numerous e-zines (on-line magazines that don't exist in print) in the world are created and promoted by the founders themselves, in Croatia there is only one e-zine that promotes a different understanding of women and their role in society – CROW (Croatian Women – [www.crowmagazine.com](http://www.crowmagazine.com)).

We would also like to mention the web page of Sunčana Špriovan, a graphic and web designer, <http://www.xvision.org/sun/>. There she promotes her work and shows practical examples of how women can learn Internet skills at a very advanced level.

In the end, we have to stress that we have put together this summary by selecting web pages that deal with those issues that we think are the most common focus of women's NGOs on the Internet. We cannot list all the web pages that deserve to be mentioned. We also believe that we must have unintentionally overlooked some web pages created by women. We apologize to individuals and groups that have been left out. To achieve visibility on the Internet, it doesn't suffice to merely exist – you have to promote your work, join networks, list your address on search engines, and distribute information about your activity in as many ways as you can. There are several billions web addresses on the Internet and it is becoming more and more easier to stay unnoticed if one doesn't use promotion and self-involvement. On-line activism requires a strong commitment and investment of time and money so that you could keep up with the development of the Internet. On the Internet, as in other spheres of life, only the strongest, most active and fastest survive.