

# E-Empowerment through Strengthening Women's Policy Issues via the Internet

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## INTRODUCTION

Both Internet studies and women's and gender studies formulated various hopes and fears for the effects of the Internet on gender relations at an early point. Whereas some scholars saw it as a male domain, others pinned hopes for overcoming dichotomous gender constructions to the new technology. The Internet was also seen as an opportunity to network women's policy activists and to strengthen women's policy issues from the very beginning.

There have, however, been few studies of how women specifically use the Internet to further feminist issues. This article addresses this question of Internet use in women's policy networks based on an empirical study, which examined the democratizing use of the Internet for German women's networks. We start off by signifying the importance of the Internet within the developments of the women's movement and giving an overview of the existing research findings. We then analyze the use of the Internet within women's policy networks, using the three dimensions "information", "interaction," and "political action". We wind up the article by outlining an idea that could be used to better concentrate and structure existing Internet services, possibly strengthening women's public political spaces.

## BACKGROUND

From its very beginnings, the Internet has been a space for feminists to network and hold discussions: Professional organizations of and for women use the Internet to call attention to women's underrepresentation in technical and scientific occupational areas and to publish background material on

the gender-hierarchical division of labor. Women suffering from specific illnesses or with experience of violence can find help and opportunities for exchange via virtual self-help organizations. Women network on an international level via mailing lists on various subjects, such as development policy or breaches of human rights. Cyberfeminists deconstruct the social category of woman with subversive irony and humor, and experiment with new identities in a variety of ways. These and many other pieces of the jigsaw fit together to indicate the broad-based professional and voluntary work of diverse women on the Internet, who are often also active outside of the net in informal networks or established organizations. The Internet appears to offer a wide variety of potentials for women's policy activities.

This diversity cannot, however, be taken for granted, as women's policy activists have been under increasing pressure to justify their activities and standpoints since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas discrimination against women as a whole was undisputed within the women's movements of the industrialized nations in the 1970s, this view is no longer universally accepted today.

Two developments in particular are behind this change:

- In the industrialized nations, an increasing number of women are being integrated into the labor market. Young women and men have reached an equalized educational level to a major extent, lifestyles are becoming increasingly pluralized, and young women frequently take the existence of equality for granted in these countries.

- Simultaneously, the theoretical discussion on the category of gender has changed direction. Since the mid-1980s, discussion has clearly refocused on the differences *between* women. The call to integrate further axes of inequality alongside gender—such as class, race, and sexuality—that accompanies this development has made it more difficult to justify and realize women's policy activities, despite leading to important new insights.

In this situation, which has led to feelings of uncertainty among those interested and active in women's policy, the Internet provides new spaces for experimentation, which women's policy activists from various types of organizations, associations, and networks use for their very diverse concerns. The new medium appears to be ideally suited to today's age of new disorder, characterized by multiple experiences of discrimination that cannot always be precisely assigned to a specific group.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1990s, gender and Internet studies have addressed the extent to which the Internet as a technology is relevant to women or gender and can set gender hierarchies in motion. We can distinguish three positions:

1. **The Internet as a Male Domain:** One significant thread of research on the subject of Internet and gender aims to reveal male dominance on the net. Early studies in particular on access, gender-specific matters of use and communication, and the content of the net come to the conclusion that the Internet is predominately androcentric and, like the "real world", steeped with inequalities and power relationships (Herring, 1996; Spender, 1995). More recent studies, however, show that gender-specific differences have less influence on the digital divide than differences in the factors of age, education and profession (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Winker, 2005).
2. **The Internet as a Space for Deconstructing Dichotomous Gender Conceptions:** At the same time, feminists have developed utopian

visions of a world beyond dichotomous concepts of gender. The possibility of "gender swapping" on the Internet prompted hopes that identities could be constructed in diverse ways (Bruckman, 1993; Turkle, 1995). Cyberfeminists retell the story of technology and gender, interpreting the net as feminine (Plant, 1997), and experiment with gender stereotypes in a playful, joyful, and artistic way (Hawthorne & Klein, 1999).

3. **The Internet as an Opportunity for Women's Policy:** The third thread in the feminist debate on the Internet consists of expectations that women could make use of the Internet to further their own issues and interests. Feminists see new possibilities for networking common interests and for publicizing these subjects (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002). Feminist discourses also express expectations of building solidarity and communities (Shade, 2002) and worldwide access to diverse knowledge (Floyd, Kelkar, Klein-Franke, Kramarae, & Limpangog, 2002; Harcourt, 1999). However, Shade (2002) and others warn women not to overestimate the Internet. She points out that, although the Internet does offer a variety of opportunities for women's participation in many areas of society, very many women (and men) are also excluded from the net due to both technical requirements (knowledge and availability of hardware and software, lack of infrastructure such as telephone lines and connections in "third world" countries) and socio-economic conditions.

## E-EMPOWERMENT

Prognoses, hopes and fears have dominated research to date. There have been very few systematic surveys on how the Internet's possibilities and the new scope for action emerging for political work are utilized and adopted in the context of gender or women's policy issues. The empirical study "E-Empowerment: Use of the Internet in Women's Policy Networks" tackles this research gap, asking to what extent the new medium is used by women's policy activists in Germany for empowerment, in the sense of strengthening their own power and influence.

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