

The background of the entire page is a textured, olive-green color. It is decorated with a repeating pattern of dark, stylized handprints. Each handprint is oriented with the palm facing forward and the fingers spread. The handprints are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some overlapping slightly. The overall effect is a sense of collective action and shared knowledge.

# KNOWLEDGE IN YOUR HANDS

StreeNet Online Course on Women's Rights

**A Report**

Akshara, a Women's Resource Centre  
Mumbai, India



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The StreeNet online course on feminism and the Indian women's movement was an experiment and owes much to many people. Eva Warberg from Joyce, Sweden introduced us to the idea of using the Net as a medium of dialogue. In spite of her existing work, she enthusiastically worked hard for funds and the course. Shakun gave us the gift of a name. We missed her in the making of the course.

As we groped to find our bearings, we had intensive dialogues with Geeta Bhardwaj in the Jagori office and Ashish Basu of NIIT. We would like to thank Pravin Gandhi for putting us in contact with Brainvisa Technologies, which generously helped with the software and technical support.

The Akshara team involved with the StreeNet experiment consisted of Anita Mehta, central system coordinator; Nandita Gandhi, module editor and overall responsibility and Nandita Shah, visual and layout. Chetna Desai helped out during the Mid- Course Meeting and the entire staff took on the organization of the official launch of StreeNet at a press conference. We thank Shabana Azmi for coming for the event at such a short notice.

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# **Introduction:**

## **From Pigeons to E-mail**

Things have certainly changed in the communications field since the days when messages had to be carried by pigeons. With the advent of electronic mail or e-mail, we can now communicate across the widest geographical barriers in high-speed connectivity through an international computer network: the Internet. The attributes of the Internet have been praised already on numerous occasions. So we will briefly point to those that relate to the NGO sector.

What is important for us is that the Internet hosts a tremendous wealth of information that keeps growing every day. We can both access as well as contribute to it quite easily. This largely unrestricted use makes this medium a more democratic one than traditional methods and in turn promotes a proliferation of knowledge. The importance of this lies in the fact that knowledge is empowering, an essential tool for people to create their own development process and transform the world to their benefit. There have been innovative ways in which NGOs have used the Internet to override traditional obstacles and strengthen community services. In Pondicherry, India, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation established an online database where information requested by local people was transmitted in their vernacular language. Women could obtain details on health ailments, vets, and the market price of vegetables or world news. In Lethem, Guyana, an organization of indigenous women hired a young member to create a website and put up their handicrafts. This helped sell their products around the world (Vikas Nath).

Another area, the Internet can make an impact on, is education. Users can access information quickly on any imaginable topic through search engines or read an Indian magazine in France. They can opt for formal education through online courses with teachers, material and tests and earn a diploma or certificate. Online courses have been put forward as an alternative to distance education. However, all of this firstly requires an access to the technology. For most of the world's population the benefits of the Internet are a bleak or unheard of prospect. The majority of users

are in the developed countries. Women both in the developed and developing countries are in a small minority. Although it is uncertain exactly how many people log on to the Internet, it is estimated that women form 22 percent of Internet users in Asia, 38 percent of those in Latin America, and six percent in Middle Eastern countries (Hafkins, 2001). One broad reason can be women's historical alienation from science and technology education and tools in general because of the restrictions on them, the traditional division of labour and their unequal status in society.

Thus, particularly in developing countries, encouraging women to use the Internet through education and training can create novel avenues for empowerment by upgrading their professional skills and employment potential. Most importantly, women in NGOs can make use of this technology to positively impact more women through their work. In the long run, the Internet can empower NGOs and women to become better catalysts for change towards a more just and sustainable world.

## **The Beginnings of the StreeNet Program**

The same scenario which was present vis a vis women and ICT manifested itself at the micro level with NGOs, women and technology. Women, more than men, lagged behind in usage and exploration of the Internet. So, as our broad objective, we thought it appropriate to combine Internet skills with theoretical skills.

StreeNet's goals were to

- Upgrade the Internet skills of women activists i.e. familiarizing them with surfing, using different web-sites, search engines and increase their Internet proficiency
- Provide theoretical content on feminism and gender relations, and engaging the e learners in debate about issues that women confront today.
- StreeNet's comprehensive approach combined practical skills (action research, survey methods, and organizing campaigns) and promoted networking amongst activists concerned with women's issues through the Internet.

These objectives took shape after a chance meeting with friends and activists in Sweden who were keen to use the Internet to bring together women activists from Sweden and India. They had visualized using their existing software called First Class as the medium and were willing to raise some funds from the Swedish International Development Agency for the program. However, only the Indian part of the project was passed so in place of our Swedish partners we contacted other women's documentation centres for a preliminary meeting. We named the program `StreeNee and resolved to float our own electronic course. None of us were software professionals or extremely Net savvy. But we were enthusiastic, willing to experiment and convinced that it was a worthwhile program.

In the second meeting, one group dropped out and another took its place. Akshara had a set of three committed partners.

- Sakhi from Trivandrum
- Jagori from Delhi
- Alochana from Pune

We drew up a plan of action and began with the criteria for a selection of e learners and the formulation of the modules for the course. The target group for the course was chosen as young women activists working in NGOs and who might not have been exposed to the women's movement. The drafting of the modules was divided between three of the four collaborators. The most difficult part was how do we launch it as an online program? We could not use First Class as suggested by our Swedish friends as it was in Swedish and other software like Blackboard and WebCT were too expensive.

Eventually, we appealed to an indigenous software company, Brainvisa, and their sense of corporate social responsibility to provide a software package and technical support for a nominal cost. Adapting the `classroom format' to an online interactive course and integrating the course modules into the Learning Management System required help from graphic and games designers, as well as language editors. It was a novel process and a huge learning experience for us. It required the close involvement of the Akshara team and several visits to Pune to meet the

Brain visa team. Subsequently, at every stage of the course there were administration problems with systems failures and forgotten commands.

StreeNet's co-ordinators in each city were to select e learners who had basic literacy on the Net and Word Program, and were currently working in a NGO. Around 56 women from the 4 cities were accepted for the course. The applicants met with their city co-ordinators and were introduced to the course methodology. StreeNet's e learners would "enter a virtual classroom" with instructors - academics and experts in their specific fields- teaching them and holding collective discussions and chats so as to ensure frequent interaction between e learners, the central administration and city moderators. In case someone had operational questions or encountered a technical problem, they could contact the central administration for help. It was looked after by a member of the Akshara team. Likewise, teachers would be available for help regarding the course and assignments. Besides four hours per week of course work, which included accessing StreeNet and reading relevant offline material, the e learners were to meet face to face once a month in their cities and for a midcourse meeting to discuss additional themes that were not covered by the online course. These meetings were meant to promote debate through group presentations, sharing of experiences, workshops / discussions on commonly identified themes, and panel presentations by experts.

## **The StreeNet Course**

### **Overview**

When an e learner logged on to the course and filled in their pass-words, they had access to the first part of the course or the Overview. It gave them an idea of the course material, the course structure and drove home the point that it was meant to combine theory and praxis so that it would be relevant for their organizational work.

A brief introduction to the StreeNet course can be viewed on our website:  
[www.aksharacentre.org](http://www.aksharacentre.org)

## **Module 1: Understanding Feminism [created by Alochana]**

The module starts with two assignments. Assignment 1 was designed to bring out the preconceptions of the e learners on Feminism. It asks the e learners to interview five women, friends or strangers, on whether they considered themselves feminists and if not, why? The e-learners were then assigned to write about their survey results and post it online. Assignment 2 asked e-learners to create slogans for the cartoons presented in the Overview or to identify existing myths about feminism and turn them into slogans for a banner. Two of the best slogans were to be put up in the Discussion Forum.

The course then moved on to Section 1, which introduced the e learners to Types of Feminism. The origins, mechanisms and kinds of women's oppression, as well as some of the "solutions" or "action alternatives" were explored through the analysis of different feminist ideologies: Liberal, Marxist, Radical, Socialist, and Post Modern. In addition to Western feminist thinkers, this module touched on the long tradition of Indian thinkers who struggled for women's rights. Patriarchy and gender were studied as societal systems that restricted women and finally these concepts were related to current issues such as women's sexual and reproductive rights.

To check how much the student had grasped this theoretical section, we asked them in Assignment 3 to reason out which of the feminist theories offered a satisfactory explanation to the subordination of women. All the e learners were then asked to enter the Discussion Forum and interact with others on their understanding. A lively discussion followed with e learners raising important points on the issues of humanism and human rights. At a more personal level, they spoke about raising children in a feminist manner. The Chat Session gave them an opportunity to interact with experts like Dr Sharmila Rege, a lecturer at the Pune University.

Section 2 gave a short introduction to the understanding of conceptual tools and an assignment. Assignment 4 asked e learners to locate and show how two advertisements in the mass media degraded women. In order to explain or reason, we need analytical tools, which we often use quite unconsciously. To explain women's subordination we need to

understand some basic concepts like patriarchy, the notion of differences between women and the difference in using the term sex and gender.

The last Assignment 5 tied up this theoretical input by asking the e learners to outline their vision of a future society in the form of poetry, a short story or a song. Alternatively they could write about whether they considered Viva, the all-women's music group, to be feminist. The Module ended with a Self-Assessment Test, which gave e learners percentage marks.

## **Module 2: Indian Women's Movement [created by Jagori]**

This module was formulated to give the e learners a glimpse of the history of the Indian women's movement to understand the evolution and shift in issues and be able to connect their work with the movement. It begins with Section 1 by comparing the lives of women today with that of the previous generation. It is clear that more options are presently available for some Indian women in education, work and individual aspirations. The present generation of women can discuss social equality with greater ease than their grandmothers. But as a whole, women still face grave inequalities in our society. This can be seen in the Census statistics on literacy, sex ratio, and participation in the workforce, violence against women etc. Assignment 1 asks e-learners to write on women's status by using any four indicators from the Census or any other data. Web links were provided in the course's library.

Section 2 asks the question - what is a movement? It is common to hear questions like "Do we have a women's movement today?" "Is it not a middle class phenomenon?" or "Is it not a western notion?" It goes on to answer the questions by defining the term movement, the common beliefs of its component members, its non-monolithic or diverse nature, types of organizations and the visible and invisible changes it has brought in. The interest in the movement is demonstrated by the growing attendance of women to the National Conferences and the UN sponsored global events.

Section 3 is a succinct presentation of the two phases of the Indian women's movement during the Social Reform and Nationalist Movements in the 19`" and early 20'h centuries. The work and achievements of the

activists who had led these movements were recalled. The history lesson was meant to be a backdrop to the contemporary phase of the women's movement. The Self-Assessment Test checked on the off line reading done by the e learners on the two historical periods.

The novel part of Section 4 was a pictorial map of India. A click on any of the states in the country resulted in a pop up box with details of struggles. The contemporary women's movement came into the limelight with the Matura rape case in the 1980s and the nation-wide campaigns against rape and violence against women. Ideological differences between the contemporary movement and the earlier counterparts are explored as well as the shifts in goals and focus.

The last Section looks at the some important debates within the women's movement. For example, whilst asking for women's rights and positive discrimination for women, how should we look at the issue of gender-neutral laws? To wrap up this module, e learners held a Chat Session with Dr Nivedita Menon, lecturer at Delhi University and did a practical assignment on the features of an ongoing campaign in their organization

### **Midcourse Meeting:**

*[May 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003, Khargar, Mumbai]*

After completing the first two modules of StreeNet, e learners came together with teachers and their city co-ordinators for a 'physical' meeting in Mumbai. The purpose of this meeting was also to acquaint the e-learners with each other, build the possibility of collaboration between organisations and to discuss important themes that were not included in the online course. It was attended by over 25 students the largest numbers coming from Kerala and Pune. The four days of presentations and discussions were interspersed with personal sharing of experiences, a social get together and a visit to the city to formally launch StreeNet with the press and public.

## MID COURSE MEETING

Date	Day	TIME	EVENT
May, 19th 2003	Day 1	Morning	Arrival and registration
		1.00 – 2.00	Lunch
		2.00 – 4.00	Personal Introduction : 20 Women
		4.00 – 4.30	Tea
		4.00 – 6 .00	Feminism, Women's Movement, New Issues- Kalpana Vishwanth and Nandita Gandhi
		6.00 - 6.30	Tea and Snacks
		6.30 – 8.00	The Caste Factor Dr. Sai Thakur
		8.00 – 9.00	Dinner
		9.00 – 10.00	Personal Introduction: 20 Women
May, 20th 2003	Day 2	9.00-11.00	Sex Work and Trafficking - Kalpana Vishwanath
		11.00 – 11.15	Tea
		11.15 – 1.00	Feminist Critique of Literature - Dr.Roshan G. Shahani
		1.00 – 2.00	Lunch
		2.00 – 4.00	New Skills
		4.00 4.30	Tea
		4.30 – 6.00	Body Politics - Dr. Nivedita Menon
		6.00 – 8.00	Tea and Communalism - Advocate Irfan Engineer
		8.00 Onwards	Dinner and Dance

<b>Date</b>	<b>Day</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Event</b>
May,21st 2003	Day 3	10.00 – 12.00	Human Rights Discourse - Dr. Nivedita Menon
		12.00 – 1.00	Lunch
		1.00 – 3.00	Bus into City
		3.00 – 5.00	Press Conference
		5.00 – 8.00	Free Time
		8.00 - 10.00	Bus Back to Khargar
May, 22nd 2003	Day 4	9.30 – 11.00	Case study of a Campaign – Raghav
		11.00 - 11.15	Tea and Evaluation
		11.15 – 1.00	Video Screenings
		1.00 – 2.00	Lunch
		2.00 – 4.00	Departure

### **Module 3: Globalisation and Development**

Usually people are who are not acquainted with economics or its jargon tend to shy away from it, thus, reducing their ability to affect./ decide this process. The third module was meant to simplify and help e-learners do an in-depth analysis of the globalization phenomenon and in particular its impact on women.

Section 1 started with a comparison of the earlier model of economics in India with the one which was implemented as 'New Economic Policies' in 1991. The former was a mix of the liberal and the socialist, welfares model. The rationale for the shift was that the country was in debt, had no foreign exchange and therefore there was no choice but to shift to a

capitalist or neo liberal economics paradigm. The new economic policies facilitated the entry of foreign goods, capital and companies.

Assignments 1a, 1b and 2 were simple ones meant to get e learners to begin discussions on the liberalization process through a comparison between the older and newer economic periods by interviews and a word association game. They were asked to write a small essay to test their understanding of terms like globalization and structural adjustment. Section 2 explored the change in terminology from international to global. One of the main reasons was the instant communication brought in by information and communication technology.

The lengthy Section 3 was on the variety of impacts on women. The economic dimension of the new policies stated the important changes in the financial market and in restructuring industry. Women workers were particularly at risk in the labor market. The impact of macro policies filters down to the household where women bear the brunt of expenditure reduction strategies. Socially, studies have shown that the establishment of a global market by multi nationals and cultural imperialism by the western countries had created a cultural and identity crisis. A shift to right wing conservatism placed restrictions on women's freedoms in the name of Indian culture and tradition. Assignment 3 invited e learners to make a list of all the positive and negative effects of liberalization-on women.

It is common to hear that all change comes with a cost. In Section 4, we explored who are the people who bear the costs i.e. who were the winners, who benefit and the losers, who bear the cost of liberalisation and globalisation? On the whole, all of us are losers as we are faced with a de-humanisation process. In order to reflect on this process, it is necessary to go back to a set of core values such as sustainable development, right to livelihood and social justice. The globalisation process is depleting global natural resources, shilling decision-making power out of the hands of local communities and countries, making rich countries richer and within countries, the rich minority is becoming richer, and the majority of people poorer, pointing to a "development" which is more concerned with profit than the welfare of people. Global resistance can be seen in the WTO protests in Seattle 1999, the Clean Clothes Campaign in Europe, the

farmers movement in Karnataka, the struggles of tribal women in Thane, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and many others. Issues that were previously thought as separate are increasingly recognized as interconnected for example environmental degradation, labour rights and women's health. The last Assignment 4 asks e-learners to identify any one issue in their organization and describe its connection to globalisation processes. What sort of campaign would they construct around the issue?

The course ended with a Chat Session with Nandita Gandhi on globalisation.

### **The Ending**

A certificate with grades was distributed to all the e learners.

# **QUILTING THE NET:**

## **an experiment with online learning**

Nandita Gandhi

### **Introduction**

The future seems to have arrived. The information and communications technological revolution has in a relatively short period of time introduced new methodologies and activities into our lives bringing about changes in our way of thinking, living, employment and social institutions. Feminist scholarship, concerned about its impact on women, has put forward different studies and conclusions. Once again there is the concern that the new changes may bypass women. The arguments and analysis are very similar to those made in studying the exclusion of women from the field of science and technology. We know that society's starting premise is that women are essentially unscientific i.e. not rational but more emotional and perpetuates this belief by systematically excluding them from the knowledge and use of tools and skills. The exclusion begins in the household, continues through school and is reinforced by other institutions. The majority of women are thus not part of the culture of technology. The sexual division of labour in households further restricts them from 'leisure' time hobbies and surfing the Internet. Raised and socialised into being anti-technology, the question - how can women overcome their resistant to new technologies? Is a crucial one. The other crucial issue is how can we take those women who have already taken the first steps to another level of involvement in technology? We put forward the proposition that we need to recognise the agency of women users of the Internet. Our strategy to strengthen women must include engaging with them in their areas of interest and with contents that make a difference in their lives and struggles and at the same time encourage the learning of the medium.

### **Users**

There is no way to calculate the number of Internet users as people access it at home, through cyber cafes and at work. The rough estimate is that twice as many men than women get onto the Internet. In the US, about 38

percent of women use the Net and the rate falls in many developing countries. Less than one percent of the population – male or female - has Internet access out of which women form 22 percent of all Internet users in Asia, 38 percent of those in Latin America, and six percent of Middle Eastern users (Hafkins, 2001). The majority of these users do so as part of their work or tools of production like for data entry, manufacture and for programming. Others use it as a tool of communications. Very few are producers like net content providers, designers, inventors and engineers. Undoubtedly there is a need to encourage more women into the field through education and training. This will mean their individual advancement, increase in knowledge and employment potential. It will increase the mass of women using this technology. It is not necessary to repeat that these women are from the elite or middle class and urban backgrounds. A very small beginning has been made in taking this technology to urban slums and rural communities. The Mahila Samakya in Rajasthan gave a demonstration of this to former US President Clinton. New implements and technological advancements at first seem elitist. Compared to a stick, the plough must have seemed sophisticated, two and four wheelers are still considered male areas though more women drive cars and some buses and taxis. The computer's mouse need not be a male one if enough women accept it and use it.

We have taken up the task of upgrading the skills of existing users by involving them in their areas of interest in the context of the women's movement. Our target group was young women who were part of non-governmental organisations with a minimum knowledge of e mail and the Word program. As we know from our own experience of working in NGOs, there is a dearth of time for upgrading one's skills and knowledge. Yet our work demands that we expand our scope of information and skills. Online learning seemed the best answer to the limitations and scope of the situation. It would simultaneously address the issue of skills and information.

### **Online Learning**

Very simply, the Internet is an international network of computers linked together to exchange information. The core of this network consists of

permanently joined computers with high speed connectivity. Once you connect to a service provider, your computer 'talks' to another anywhere in the world. The Internet grew out of a US Defence Department project in the 1960s designed to link its military bases, research departments and manufacturers. As computer manufacturers and software companies realised its potential, more services were provided and more people began using it. No one really owns the Internet as anyone can place whatever material its wants on it. Its uses keep expanding from electronic mail, shopping, business, bank support, and games to music. New developments keep taking place making the Internet indefinable and a complex phenomenon. In the final analysis, it is less about computers and more about people overcoming physical barriers in order to communicate and share information.

It did not take long for education to join the list of possibilities. Education connected itself to computers in three ways:

- To learn about the computer itself
- To learn using the computer and Net
- To use the computer and the Net as an instrument of education

Online learning is gradually replacing video training, complementing classroom teaching and CD Roms and manuals. It is part of the information technology industry with training institutes and companies offering programmes or learning management systems and numerous courses for corporate staff training and for higher level academic teaching. The proliferation of online learning courses has produced a body of literature on its theory and implementation.

Shepherd (2002) puts forward three models, which are commonly used for e learning.

- The self-study model comes from books as manuals and CD Roms and relies heavily on written material. It does not presuppose an interaction with the tutor or other learners. The learner is expected to advance according to the text and his/her own pace. The self-study model makes manuals and learning more accessible to others when it is placed on the Internet.

- The classroom model takes the classroom onto the Net and the tutor uses Chat, notice boards and quizzes to teach and assess the learner. The virtual classroom saves the learner travel time and cost.
- Lastly the distance learning model relies on a scheduled learning process with minimum interaction with the trainer. The Net is seen as an instrument or new channel for distance learning.

Each of these models has their pros and cons and-usually learning courses do a mix and match according to their learner profiles. Honey and Mumford have classified different sets of learners according to their learning characteristics. Though it is impossible to bring one homogenous set of learners together when offering a course, it helps understand various styles of learning and matching course material to a generalized profile.

- The activists have an open mind and like to 'do' things, experiment, and try new things. They will give anything at least one try.
- Reflectors like to 'look before leaping' and are not so open to experimentation. They like to gather data and are slow in making up their minds.
- The theorists use logic and rationality, are used to organised academic way of thinking and arguing.
- Pragmatics is hands on people who like applying what they have learnt. Pure theory is not their cup of tea.

### **The Streenet Experiment**

Given the rush and worry of our daily lives, we had longed for online courses, which we could access. When a feminist teaching institution in Sweden asked Akshara' to collaborate with it on designing and executing a course for activists of the North and South, we readily agreed. However a dearth of funds prevented that project but saw through the India part of it. We were to get technical support from our Swedish partners and access to their software. Though the Net made that possible, it could not do away with the language barrier. So except for some funds we were on our own.

We had spoken about this experiment to some documentation centers of which Sakhi from Trivandrum, Jagori from Delhi and Alochana from Pune joined in as partners. We set our objectives as:

- To give our e-learners a comprehensive course combining theory, practice and skills. To engage the students in a dialogue/discussion on the emergence of the women's movement, theoretical perspectives on feminism and other issues confronting the women's movement
- To introduce our e-learners to the fascinating world of the Internet and e-learning by surfing, using different web-sites, search engines and become proficient in the use of the Net.
- Through the Net, promote collaborations / networking amongst activists on issues related to the women's movement.

Each city was asked to select learners after circulating a brochure announcing the course and its modules. The criteria were very simple and basically needed basic knowledge of the Net and the Word program. They also had to be working in an organisation for a year'. Each city had its applicants come to an initial meeting at which the course and its requirements were explained. It gave the learners time and information to make up their minds to join. This was the easiest part. We had to make sure that our three objectives would be realised in the three parts, namely the selection of the software, its implementation and the learning modules. We tapped a number of experts for advice on software, course design and format' but did not realise the close co-operation between technology, academics and training methodology.

We choose an indigenous<sup>4</sup> Learning Management System, which gave the possibility of implementing the 'classroom model' with an interactive format for our learners, who we categorized as 'activists' learners. Interactive formats are difficult to design as they require graphic inputs, games designers and language editors. Unfortunately, each is a specific area and requires bringing specific technicians or people together in a team. The software company also provided the technical support for integrating the learning module into the system. As our software partners were unused to our course material, they could not directly design and

execute it. It turned out to be a huge learning experience for us. We had to involve ourselves at every stage including selecting visuals. It was an effort to bring together knowledge of technology and clarity on course material. The learning system problems continued in the form of bugs, small failures, and forgotten commands all through the course. On our side, one person who was initially not Internet savvy and had no training in software systems, educated herself to handle the functionalities took over the role of the central systems administrator, which involved coordinating with the learners and liaison with the software persons <sup>5</sup>.

All four of us from documentation centres were used to the academic format and classroom teaching. But that method would not be exploiting the potential of the Internet and online learning. The modules needed to be structured in a way that gave the gist of the training material and at the same time provoked the learner to do offline reading to complement it. Our three<sup>6</sup> modules consisted of Understanding Feminism, The Indian Women's Movement and Globalisation and Women. The online course was not open but time bound and for a period of six months. We interspersed assignments and selfassessments between module sections. This gave learners the motivation to read the resource kit of articles and books from the recommended reading list. Deadlines are a two edged tool. They motivate learners to keep on track but most of them appeal for extensions or even drop out, as they have not finished assignments. In order to achieve our last objective we introduced monthly meetings in each city amongst learners and a mid-course meeting between different city learners. Meetings facilitated learners getting to know each other and helped sort out their questions and doubts, which were aired in the Discussion Forums and Chats.

## **Lessons Learnt**

The online course is not over but we can point out some of the lessons we have learnt from it.

- Academic institutions and documentation centers would like to have their own online course. It is a good objective, as we need as many as possible. However, we usually underestimate the technical and financial constraints. Manufactured or custom made

software costs are high. We need high speed computers and cable connections.

- Technical support is needed at our end in order to implement it. We do not need software engineers but interested people who will undertake training.
- Course design also needs technical and graphic support. Interactive modules require images and games, which require time and money. We had to delay the launch of the course, as we had to continually check the modules.
- The main 'selling' aspect of online courses is easy access, anytime and anywhere. Women activists like us had assumed that they could fit the online course into their busy schedules. But learning requires a place and time free of distractions. For women, neither the workplace nor the home provides such a place.
- Initially a lot of time is needed in 'hand holding' as women are resistant and unused to the medium. A sympathetic coordinator with loads of time is essential.
- The number of drop outs increased with each assignment and as the novelty of the course disappeared. Time was one factor. We believe that women need support from their organizations and co-workers to provide them on the job time to spend on the course. Most learning courses try to retain the interest by using varied means of presentation and through graphics.
- Every course needs a few dedicated tutors or trainers. In our case, we expected activists of the documentation centers to participate as trainers given their normal load of work. Learners need more time and involvement from trainers to goad them to overcome their resistance to technology and keep them interested in the course.

### **Chronology of Quotes**

" I am very excited about the course, but am totally new to it and am wondering whether I am doing it right?"

" I am at a loss on how to get started. Help!"

" The idea of the assignment was good. I asked 5 women whether they would call themselves feminists and they gave me odd looks. Now I am wondering whether I should extend it to men as well".

" I am way behind in everything. Perhaps I should drop out. I just can't seem to find the time to log on, read or do assignments. Can I get a refund?"

"Like you, I could not find 'feminism' and 'feminist' in the Hindi dictionary. Can anyone help?"

"Hey, only a few people keep talking on the Discussion Forum, where are the others?"

" What's the point in having a Resource Kit in your office. The whole idea of the online course is not to travel."

"It is my son's second birthday, I would like him to be a feminist". "Are you one yourself?"

" It will be okay if he is not anti feminist!"

" Sixteen of us from Kerala would like to come to the mid course meeting".

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Akshara, a resource centre was formally established in 1995. It has a free library for students, youth and gender based programs. It also brings out low cost

educational material and training modules. For information, contact: aksharacentre@vsnl.com

<sup>2</sup> Each city selected from 12 to 15 learners. Finally the total number of learners who actually registered for the course was 56 from 4 cities working in NGOs.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank Pravin Gandhi for putting us in contact with Brainvisa, Geeta Bhardwaj and Ashish Basu of NIIT for their comments and time.

<sup>4</sup> Brainvisa Technologies based in Pune has generously helped with the software and technical support.

<sup>5</sup> The Akshara team involved with the StreeNet experiment consisted of Anita Mehta, central system co-ordinator; Nandita Gandhi, module editor and overall responsibility and Nandita Shah, visual and layout.

<sup>6</sup> Module 1 Understanding Feminism had the following sections: What is Feminism? Feminist Ideologies (Western and Indian), Some Feminist Concepts [co-ordinated by Alochana]

Module 2 Indian Women's Movement had the following sections: Change and Continuity, What is a Movement? The Reform and Nationalist Movements, Contemporary Movement, Important Debates [co-ordinated by Jagori].

Module 3 Globalisation and Women had the following sections: Critique of Development, Principles of Globalisation, the Indian shift of economic paradigm, Role of State and Resistance [co-ordinated by Akshara]



