

# Women's Networking for Change: New Regional and Global Configurations

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**This article briefly reviews different women's networks associated with the Society for International Development's (SID) work on women's empowerment, reproductive rights and health, political conflict and well-being. The focus of the article is both global and regional with a particular look at the activities of different South Asian networks responding to the region's growing political conflicts and to the alarming increase of violence against women. She uses the framework of the "women and politics of place" developed by a SID-based research group coordinated by Arturo Escobar and herself, to explain the forms of networking and what they term "meshworking" that are currently evolving.**

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade women's networking has emerged as a prominent set of responses by civil society to economic globalisation. The actions around which women's networks are formed have focused on many issues from violence against women, to health and rights, to lobbying for fair trade. Often working at the grassroots level and involving economically poor women, these women's networks are reconfiguring globalisation through a complex new type of networking.

In this paper the author briefly reviews different women's networks associated with the Society for International Development's (SID) work on women's empowerment, reproductive rights and health, political conflict and well-being. The focus is both global and regional with a particular look at the activities of different South Asian networks responding to the growing political conflict in the region and to the alarming increase of violence against women. Working with international support, many of these networks are a loose coming-together of women and men working for women's empowerment and an end to oppression. They act in response to changes at the local level and also to the rise of international concern and therefore resources, in particular due to the United Nations-led debates on women, human rights, culture, gender and economics and reproductive health and rights. The reasons why these groups have become connected has been to share experiences

and information, to formulate strategy with greater understanding of situations, to lobby governments, and to advocate their position at the regional or international level, often using international governmental and non-government structures catalysed by the UN world conferences. The networks create spaces or meeting points across different interest groups—social movement activists, researchers, NGOs, CBOs and UN policy-makers.

It must be emphasised that this is not an empirical study of the many women's networks globally who are working for change. Rather it is looking at the different patterns and configurations that women's networks are taking today, particularly taking advantage of the new forms of communication that are now allowing women to communicate, network and collaborate on a global scale not possible earlier (Harcourt 2000). Today women build alliances between the local and the global, mobilise public opinion, and push the agenda of gender equality.

In analysing the different types of women's networks operating today, a group of researchers at SID has developed a conceptual framework, "women and the politics of place," that aims to capture what is new in globalisation for women, taking the concept of "place" as a potentially transformative site of political practice. The framework conceptualises globalisation in ways that disrupt the notion of a binary relationship between "the local" and "the global" in order to clarify the historical continuities and discontinuities of today's experience of globalisation. It looks at how diverse groups of women, often marginalised or invisible in mainstream politics, are engaged in new forms of politics characterised by networking centred on the body, home, environment and community. In bringing together these different experiences of place, the framework looks at women as agents who are actively shaping and confronting globalisation. Networking is one of the foremost strategies that women (in communities, organisations and as individuals) are creating to transform their "places."

We describe how some of these different women's groups are operating in networks with a regional focus on networks in South Asia: these show how these women's groups are creating new possibilities to counter some of the more negative impacts of today's rapidly changing world. Again, the present essay does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of the many thousands of women's networks in South Asia working for gender equality, to end violence against women, respond to concerns of communal violence, problems of displacement, the impact of HIV/AIDS and issues of maternal and child health and rights. Rather the essay aims to show how the "politics of place" framework can help explain the linkages made between body, home, community, environment and public space in women's political resistance to the changes brought about by globalisation. It highlights in particular South Asian groups in order to illustrate the different "politics of place" that women's networking takes in that region. An empirical study of their impact—if they manage to achieve what they set out to do—while a critical if

almost impossible project, would be the subject of another paper.

## WOMEN'S PLACE-BASED NETWORKING

The SID-WID (SID women in development) network has over 1,000 groups working in different aspects of development. It is not possible to list them all—they are featured in the bi-monthly newsletter of the network *Lisistrata* ([www.sidint.org](http://www.sidint.org)). Some examples include: the Isis sister organisations based in Uganda, Chile and the Philippines dedicated to the documentation of women's issues, and to advocacy and the dissemination of information on women at the regional and international level. The International Women's Health Coalition works with partner NGOs in Asia, Africa, Latin America and countries in post-socialist transition that are engaged in activities for the recognition, defence and promotion of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a southern based women's network joins with Network Women in Development Europe (WIDE), a membership organisation in Europe for a series of strategy meetings over women's rights as human rights. The Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) is an international advocacy network bringing together individuals and women's groups, and it has programs in the areas of Gender and Governance, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice. WEDO is a US-based international organisation that connects organisations and individuals committed to the cause of the defence and promotion of women, the environment and human rights. A global information, communication and media network, Women Action enables NGOs to contribute to the Beijing+5 Review Project. Women's Coalition for Economic Justice brings together women's groups and individuals working on globalisation, financial, trade and other economic issues at key UN and global events such as the World Global Forum. It lobbies key UN agencies and US caucuses with timely petitions informed by perspectives from all corners of the world.

All these organisations combine information-sharing, first-hand knowledge, research, analysis of policy, and advocacy work, operating in partnership with many other women's groups. They are examples of women across the world who are involved in what we have defined as (Harcourt and Escobar 2002) women's "place-based" politics: movements of resistance to mainstream politics and development in women's everyday lives, centred around the body, the household, the environment and the community. These small groups do not work in isolation. Rather, they engage in dynamic vertical and horizontal networking, connecting among themselves and with others in places far and close, across cultural, political, racial and ethnic divides.

This sort of networking enables exchanges of information, support, solidarity and the sharing of experiences that are crucial for the validation and strengthening of women's movements. These different organisations are ac-

tive in specific places and carry out their programs in particular localities, but they are also linked to others in distant locations, and a great deal of their work is carried out well beyond these spatial boundaries. These spaces are simultaneously global and place-based, the specific configuration of which is determined by their cultural content and the power dynamics at play (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1976). They are networks within themselves, but they are also linked together by connections among them, creating an even larger web of organisations and individuals with similar goals. These are the characteristics of “meshworks,” oppositional networks of social movements (Harcourt and Escobar 2002). Meshworks allow “place-based” movements linked through various levels of networking to participate more integrally in the reshaping of the global processes that determine the conditions in which women live.

Since the mid-1970s, one of the unique issues that has been taken up by women's movements is women's rights: rights to end violence against women in war and peace time; to have access to safe sex; to have choice over child-bearing; to walk safe at night; to have access to affordable and quality reproductive health services; to be free from exploitation in the family home and work place. These concerns have placed women's and girls' existence, indeed their physical bodies, on the agenda at the international level in a way that is severing the chord between the public and the private arena of women's lives. Networking as a tool of empowerment was a key factor in the interweaving of women's struggles on these often tabooed and difficult issues day-to-day level (Harcourt, Rabinovich and Alloo 2002).

The global networking on violence against women has made one of the most silenced and taboo issues one of the core issues on the human rights, health and development agenda today. This welcome development is due to the ferment of activity of women's groups around the world (Milne 2000).

## NETWORKING TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIA

Over the past decade, South Asian societies have witnessed an alarming rise in political disruption and social conflict. The continuing inequalities and destabilization of the subsistence base of a majority of people, in particular women, 70 percent of whom live in rural areas, has led to a deepening of gender oppression and violence, and of women's insecurity and lack of well-being. In cultures where honour is tied up with women's sexuality, women and girls are too often the individual and systematic targets of sexual violence, specifically when rape and sexual assaults are used as weapons of war or tactics to threaten community and family identity and structure. Economic and social insecurity can compel women to engage in transactional sex to secure their lives or those of their families. It can also impel women to try to gain access to shelter or services, including food distribution or to escape to

safety.

A study by WOREC (Women's Rehabilitation Centre) in Nepal in 2003 shows how the impacts of the Maoist conflicts are extremely wide ranging and multi-dimensional for women, leading not only to loss of loved ones but also loss of livelihoods, family networks, and increase in women's physical and social vulnerability. Rape, sexual assault illegal arrest and kidnapping all lead to weakening for individual women, their families and communities (SID-SAN 2003). In Kashmir, the years of conflict have led to prolonged trauma with issues of mental health emerging among women, particularly "half" widows (i.e. women with missing husbands). The social disruption that is caused as a result of the conflict impinges directly on women's lives as they take on new roles and added responsibilities (SID-SAN 2003). In India, women's movements continue to grapple with the deep level of violence—even sadism—experienced by Gujarat Muslim women where deep-seated ethnic and gender prejudice was fuelled by economic and political inequities (SID-SAN 2003). A disturbing form of sexual violence against women in South Asia is the trafficking of women and girls. As disruption to livelihoods, unemployment and poverty have risen, the sex trade across borders and within urban areas has increased is increasing (Maskey 2003).

Studies on women and violence (such as Jacobs, Jacobson and Marchbank 2000; Moser and Clark 2001) show how the impact of armed conflict and political violence on gender relations and gender equality are a key issue as is the growing concern at women's human rights abuses. In all forms of conflict in South Asia—military, ethnic, religious, tribal, caste and communal—gender relations have shifted. There is a clear shrinking of the space available for women to exercise their already-limited rights. Patriarchal and structural conditions also compound the complexity as women—actively or by default—participate in subjugating or limiting other women.

As a response to the pressing needs in the region there are now several innovative and independent initiatives by women's networks in South Asia, working at a local, national and regional level, to end violence against women. They operate through a complex system of networking that works alongside official government structures. The numbers of women's groups engaged is impressive—many thousands, from groups like the Asian Human Rights Commissions that have highlighted the issues around the world on progressive women's websites—to groups that lobby for centres for trafficked women and children (IDS 2004). Although the present paper can sketch only a little of what is being achieved by women's networks in South Asia, it gives a sense of the dynamism as well as the complexity of the different forms of violence that the women's face in their different places.

One network facilitated and funded by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) to end trafficking of women and children and to prevent HIV/AIDS brings together NGOs in India, Nepal and Bangladesh through a series of networking activities that facilitates communication and

interaction between the project partners. The core partners, Stop (Stop Trafficking, Oppression and Protection of Children and Women) New Delhi, India, Society for Human Development and Social Action, Kolkatta India, Maiti, Nepal and CARE Bangladesh, came together in the 1990s in order to work on trans-border trafficking of children and women between Nepal, India and Bangladesh. The main focus of the networking among the organisations is to share information and strategies on the rescue, repatriation and reintegration of survivors of trafficking, facilitating service provision, information and communication. The links among the different groups enables strong networking amongst NGOs working in the red light areas of cities and villages on the borders in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Through the network, a communication centre has been set up in order to share information. Another aim is media sensitisation on responsive and responsible reporting of issues on trafficking and HIV/AIDS, as well as advocacy work with legal and government bodies. The network maps out what is happening in the different areas, facilitating meetings among government, sex workers from India, Nepal and Bangladesh in order to discuss the problems and difficulties the NGOs are facing while carrying out the activities. The network discusses strategies on how to empower the sex worker organisations to combat trafficking, and to provide services such as rights-based recovery and repatriation; shelter and skills-training; health and legal counseling; information on HIV/AIDS; crèches; and vocational training. The network also allows the partner to link to international groups wishing to support sex workers through awareness and advocacy work.

The network supports the work of each individual partner with relevant information and education but also aims to build a much stronger response to the huge problems that the individual NGOs are facing through in-country and cross border co-operation and networking. Beyond internal networking, externally the network reaches out to other NGOs, governmental bodies and border police. Essentially, it provides a government-NGO interface in the South Asian region between Nepal, India and Bangladesh on issues of trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

In its trans-national approach, its research and investigation, its use of communication media, and formal and informal meetings, this UNDP-backed network is an example of a new type of women's network. It responds to shifting global patterns of trafficking based on a rights approach that challenges the traditional responses of authorities. While responding practically, it is also a highly politicised network tackling governance issues such as the need for a code of conduct for journalists; the role of Embassies/High Commissions in repatriation; the need for bilateral repatriation agreements; the role of law enforcement personnel in perpetrating the system; and family counseling, especially to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

## SID-SAN

Another example of networking in South Asia that links local and global concerns is the SID South Asia Network (SID-SAN) founded in 2002 is a regional research and advocacy process that links up women's organisations and gender research institutes and networks in order to examine the impact of political conflict on women's well-being in South Asia ([www.sidint.org](http://www.sidint.org)). SID-SAN aims to promote justice, gender equality, cultural and ecological pluralism, peace and well-being in the region. The network is regionally engaged in a series of national processes that are exploring: armed conflict, chauvinist conflict and political disruption on women's livelihoods and well-being. It recognises the context of economic development and economic globalisation, which have exacerbated and created political and social conflict.

The Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (Chetna) ([www.chetnaindia.org](http://www.chetnaindia.org)) founded in 1991 is an organisation based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and Jaipur, Rajasthan, which aims to empower disadvantaged women, adolescents and children to gain control over their own, their families' and communities' health. It links with rural centres, government and NGOs in the two states where it has centres, and throughout the country and region through its publications, exhibitions, issue-based workshops and networking. In networking, Chetna shares experiences, exchanges material with individuals, organisations and the press as well as undertaking advocacy on concerns critical to the health of women and children. Chetna also promotes gender and health issues through networks at the state level through Fairs that promote local NGOs work on women's health and child care and at the national level such as the Communication for Health India Network (CHIN), which is a network of organisations working on poverty and health by developing a communication approach. At the South Asia level, Chetna is actively involved in ARROW Asia Pacific Resource Centre which works on women's rights issues. It takes on board a holistic approach to health and rights covering economic, social and cultural concerns.

Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), based in Kathmandu, Nepal founded in 1991, with offices in rural areas, works against trafficking of women and children, HIV-AIDS and for the economic and social empowerment of women. WOREC undertakes research and fact-finding missions in Nepal on the conditions of women, organises workshops, public awareness campaigns and training courses. It is linked to a number of networks in Nepal in advocacy campaigning on trafficking, in particular Alliance Against Traffic in Women and Children in Nepal (AATWIN) as well as in South Asia and internationally, principally among women and human rights organisations. WOREC offers direct support and rehabilitation to women being trafficked in its centres, aiming to reintegrate them into society and to build their self-esteem and dignity with an emphasis on empowerment and rights. It lobbies the Nepal government and authorities to support sex workers and trafficked

women ensuring their rights in the constitution and internationally, using the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Shirkat Gah (SG) ([www.net-ngo.com](http://www.net-ngo.com)) is a Women's Resource Centre, formed almost two and a half decades ago, with two centres in Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan, committed to the empowerment of women. It defines empowerment as "self confidence, self awareness and self reliance, freedom to decide and act for oneself re education, marriage, mobility, and economic activity, and the ability to create new options and choices." While SG considers Pakistani women as a whole, its overall constituency in terms of advocacy and changing policies, its development initiatives address women with little or no access to resources and information in urban and rural areas. SG works both with policy-makers and women where they are located in communities and families. Its activities are defined by the women's human rights framework (Harcourt and Mumtaz 2002).

Issues that it has campaigned for range from discriminatory legislation (which has had devastating effects on poor women in particular), to the customary practice of honour killing, to the right to contraceptives, choice and protection in marriage, to political participation and representation and access to natural resources. Solidarity actions have included specific succour in the form of arranging shelter for homeless women, legal assistance to victims of family and domestic violence in order to obtain divorces, custody of children and maintenance from husbands. In addition, SG has facilitated the building of women's skills and capacities to enable their economic autonomy and confidence. Above all, SG has successfully promoted networking between women of varying backgrounds, classes and experiences from different regions and locations of Pakistan towards the creation of mutual understanding of the broader parameters of their lives and solidarity. Linking them internationally with women in the Muslim world and to the global women's movement has been undertaken simultaneously wherever possible.

Another example from South Asia is in Rajasthan India (Garg, 2000). Bal Rashmi, a Jaipur-based women's group founded in the early 1990s pursues the issues of women's autonomy and freedom from violence and sexual exploitation – including child marriage, rape, dowry deaths and wife torture. In order to maintain the force of their grassroots presence, the group uses transnational connections. Bal Rashmi uses international networks, the internet and their own situated perspectives to pursue equality, autonomy and protection of the integrity of women's bodies.

The women's networks that are operating in SID-SAN focus on rights, health and violence against women as one of the key development issues for the region. These networks, while responding and working with local women's needs, are also actively engaged on a political level with government and development agencies. In their networking they translate poor women's needs into the sophisticated development discourse of health and



empowerment, and in the process interact with other women's NGOs and bureaux to negotiate funding and services for the local communities. SID-SAN then becomes a useful space to exchange ideas and strategies on how to negotiate funding and service provision. The networks also strengthen their position within development discourses by making their work more visible and by fine-tuning it to the on-going discussions at global levels. Networking is an important activity to keep them in touch and to shape indirectly, the actual practice of development based on the reality and needs of poor community women.

## PLACE-BASED STRATEGIES AROUND THE BODY

These networks in South Asia illustrate the complex connections among the various levels that place operates in global times. A political defence of place by these women focuses not just on the defence of a community's land or environment or traditional culture in the face of global change, but also on a struggle for women's freedom and their right to bodily integrity, autonomy, knowledge and identity that is a mix of modern and traditional discourses. The politics of women's groups defending their places their bodies or their right to rest, exist not simply at the local level, but is intermeshed with national and international networks; the political work performed by these networks is geared towards strengthening women's economic, social and political rights.

Women's "politics of place" is a description of how different women's groups are engaging in complex multilevel strategies of politics of place: changing their sense of self, their place in the community, their cultural identity, and opening up new types of public political spaces to negotiate gender, economic and social justice as part of local and global process. As the examples suggest, "place-based politics" are not purely forms of resistance to modernisation or modern capital in the defence of traditional culture and land. They are multiple political activities carried out by women where women's groups are redefining political action to take into account their gender concerns. Such concerns are based on their own needs and in response to various forms of globalisation as it is experienced at the level of their daily lives. This process of place-based politics links localities horizontally to other political activities by women's groups. These may be located geographically in other places, building networks that are creating new configurations of culture, power and identity that are not determined solely by the global, but also by place-based practices. There is, then, a network component to all politics of place, meaning that place is neither simply local nor its politics place-bound, even if it continues to be fundamental to people's daily lives.

These civil society groups operating in networks dedicated to issues such as reproductive and sexual health and rights, domestic violence, and sexual oppression deploy global communication to advance their concerns

around women's autonomy and rights. Conflicts around the body and the home vary across cultural and geographical spaces, but increasingly a common purpose is identified by women's groups engaged in place-based politics around home and body. A common language has emerged from long years of local, national and international struggles, that renders their goals more legitimate and transparent, and adds to the strength of their appeals. From the local experiences of place-based politics and the exchange and mutual support that occurs in networking, strategies for their struggles are crafted and activated.

The increased use of the internet reflects one of the great strengths of women's place-based organisations—their ability to form partnerships and alliances. Many women's groups connected through the internet carry out education, health, human rights, and advocacy work from diverse places. They network regionally, nationally and internationally using the internet as a cheap and accessible tool to advance their concerns. There are many examples documented in the book that emerged from the SID project *Women on the Net* (Harcourt 1999) that show how women are using the potentially globally accessible tool of the internet to open out the corridors of power and create a new politics emanating from place.

Through the cyber networking—making connections among different places—women are linking their place-based defence of communities in ways that are challenging and changing public institutional spaces (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002). They are altering the boundaries between private and public in place-based politics around the body, the community and public arena. We have given many examples already of violence against women. But women working in the home are also linking with others for support on issues such as managing children and other domestic pressures. Women in high-tech factories in Asia are organising across North-South lines with the international support of women's organisations on health work conditions including women's special needs, for example on night shifts (see also Hale, this issue). And using the United Nations process, women have brought local concerns to the forefront of the international agenda (Gittler 1999), analysing women's needs in each region and connecting to political leaders willing to support a women's agenda internationally, at times in defiance of fundamentalist and anti-women positions at home.

## MESHWORKING

Through working in networks, the women's movement is actively redefining what is considered to be of public concern, and the way in which politics is made. In the process, spatial borders become blurred, an indeterminacy caused in great part by what the politics of place framework has called "meshworks." Meshworks are based on decentralised decision-making, non-hierarchical structures, self-organisation, and heterogeneity and diversity. There are non-hierarchical and fluid ways of working involving local, na-

tional and transnational movements that grow in unplanned directions. They involve two parallel dynamics: strategies of localisation and of interweaving. They are simultaneously engaging with dominant networks and retaining their characteristic plurality.

Meshworks are not necessarily “morally superior” to dominant networks or hierarchies, but they do tend to be oppositional and often time constitute new types of politics and new types of meaning. They seek to advance at the same time the goals of equality (and social justice in general) and difference. This struggle for difference-in-equality and equality-in-difference is a feature of many contemporary movements, in contradistinction with those of the most recent past. Women’s movements, ecological movements, black rights movements strategising around place in many different ways in response to and resistance to globalisation and modernity are examples of meshworks.

Meshworks are the strategies for the defence of place that emerge from the places or sites where the ideas are born and then through networks circulate, change, operate, are negotiated and made public. Meshworks facilitate the entry of the politics of the body and the home into mainstream political consciousness, where they were until recently largely absent. The aim, however, is not merely to see them integrated into the agendas of institutional policy-making, but also to redefine the way this kind of politics is made. Through networking, women seek to empower themselves to bring about change. They exchange, foment and share their knowledge and creativity to become agents in their own lives. Meshworks attain this double endeavour by simultaneously engaging with dominant networks and retaining their characteristic plurality, self-organisation and non-hierarchy. Meshworks expand the reach and influence of women’s politics around the body and the home, and operate without flattening cultural specificities in place-based politics.

Meshworks of groups bring to the fore women’s local, everyday strategies of defence of place, and incorporate them into the wider spectrum of political action. Women’s struggles, at once local and global, are not only reflections of processes occurring at levels beyond their control and immediate purview. They are themselves shaping these processes, which will in turn affect their and their families’ lives.

## CONCLUSION

The politics of place is a very practical politics responding to and shaping global change and working with alliances and networks that form around those changes. Networking on its own is not a political act; it is the networks that mobilise and strengthen “local” actions through meshworks that are bringing about change. The resulting reconfigurations have been both a response but also part of the vision that women have begun to project, based on concepts such as the caring economy, cultural diversity, a sharing of repro-

ductive and productive roles, a celebration of women's bodies and creative abilities.

Women's networking can be seen as a political response to modernity and global capitalism. The conflicts that women are experiencing within the different domains (body, home, environment and social public space) usher in new forms of cultural and political relations. As actors in their own lives, women are leading place-based activities, working together towards greater equity, respecting and working with cultural and other differences.

In the South Asian experience, briefly documented here, it is evident that networking to end violence against women and to understand the impact of political conflict on women has been critical for effective working on an everyday basis. It is central to how women's movements operate in the global world, meshing together place based local community activities to end violence against women to larger global activities to legislate and monitor all forms of discrimination, gender oppression and inequity.

Networking can be seen as a powerful way to respond fluidly to the rapid changes that women are grappling with today. It is the major way that women are gaining information, shaping strategies and building the collective power to act globally. Strategies for feminist transformation are crafted from these global connections, creating new structures of power and therefore new ways to end women's oppression.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AATWIN	Alliance Against Traffic in Women and Children in Nepal
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
Chetna	Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness
CHIN	Communication for Health India Network
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
SG	Shirkat Gah
SID	Society for International Development
SID-SAN	SID South Asia Network
SID-WID	SID Women in Development
Stop	Stop Trafficking, Oppression and Protection of Children and Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organisation
WIDE	Network Women in Development Europe
WOREC	Women's Rehabilitation Centre

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