

## **AWID Presentation: "New Tools for Changing Old Strategies in Combating Violence against Women"**

**Cheryl Thomas** is the director of the Women's Human Rights Program at The Advocates for Human Rights. She began by describing the STOPVAW website forum. STOPVAW is a new tool, a new technology instrument which was created in collaboration with many partners. The website, at [www.stopvaw.org](http://www.stopvaw.org), was developed as a forum for information, advocacy and change. It is a tool for the promotion of women's human rights in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Mongolia and Kosovo. The website features thirty countries with information on advocacy and tools to end violence against women.

Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights' Women's Program began working in this region in 1993. There were many new NGOs in the transition period from communism that were new to violence against women work, but were nevertheless very clearly focused on ending violence against women. They had identified that this was a priority for them. The one common hurdle for all of them in developing strategies to end violence against women was the lack of information. The lack of historical information had effectively cut them off, and they wanted to access information. So, in the 1990s, The Advocates took on a role to respond and research failures, successes, failures and model laws. The goal was to provide information at the touch of a finger to the women who wanted it in a more efficient way. It is far more effective than flying people out there or mailing them documents. UNIFEM, OSI and the contributions of volunteers in Minnesota, the U.S., and around the world have all contributed to this website. In addition, the technology to host this site was donated by Urban Planet. These contributions have made this website happen.

There are over 2,000 pages of information and over 7,000 links. There are four substantive sections--domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and trafficking in women. Each of these move further in-depth to four additional subsections, including Explore the Issue, Research and Reports, Law and Policy, and Training Modules. Each of the four main sections has an analysis introducing the subject. For example, under the domestic violence section, the webpage discusses the risks associated with domestic violence, model laws, and sample police protocols.

Women in the region began to want a regional network to communicate their practices and what they are learning. They also wanted to create a support network. In 2003, the Network Women's Program of OSI developed, with The Advocates, the National VAW Monitor Program. With us today, we have two Monitors: Vanja Mikulic from Montenegro and Yuliya Gureyeva from Azerbaijan. They collect information and are involved with the evolution of the site to more clearly meet their needs as they define them. Their objectives are to get information, publish this information and expose the situation to the entire world. Now, we have a great need to turn this into a multilingual website. We want to use it as an internal tool for policy makers to strategize on how to use it as an advocacy tool.

In terms of successes, the original purpose has been met. There has been a growing response for best practices. The website has received over one million hits or 40,000 per month. It is being used as a tool for information exchange. For example, the Serbian Monitor used it to disseminate information about a new domestic violence law. The Hungarian Monitor, in turn, used that information to elicit interest from the media. She is also using the website to pressure her own government in Hungary by using the site to expose recent CEDAW cases. There are so many laws in the region that are being passed. For instance, the entire history of how Bulgaria passed its new domestic violence law is now on the site. The advocate who wrote this history, Genoveva Tisheva, gets inquiries about getting a law passed by advocates in other countries.

On the other hand, the challenges are many. The Monitors are all in a situation with limited resources. The Domestic Violence section was written three years ago, and there have been many changes since then. Translation is another challenge, and there will be many more. But the many successes of the website continue to energize us.

**Eva Foldvari**, moderator of the panel and Senior Program Manager of the Network Women's Program of the Open Society Institute, said it has been a challenge for OSI to create a network of Monitors who are feeding the website and facing lots of possibilities with different ways for this website. It is a learning process for all.

**Vanja Mikulic**, the Montenegro National VAW Monitor, spoke next regarding the Montenegro National VAW Monitor experience. There are two Monitors in Montenegro, myself and Irena Milatovic. Her NGO, SOS Hotline, is the first female NGO in Montenegro and was established eight years ago. They run the SOS Hotline four hours per day and provide free legal and psychological help. They also act as a link between the victims and institutions. A few years ago, they started running trainings and succeeded in establishing five interdisciplinary teams in five main cities. They participate in drafting national policies. The SOS Hotline attorney was the coordinator for establishing the national plan of action. They also drafted a rulebook for police in domestic violence cases and monitor institutional behavior. SOS Hotline also noticed that no one was collecting data in the region, so they also began to collect statistics and data.

In terms of achievements, they have strengthened cooperation with the Governmental Gender Equality Office through joint work on this project. This has been one of their best achievements, because they succeeded in increasing cooperation with the government office and promoting the site in both the NGO sector and governmental sector. They collect data at two levels—the NGO and government. They also strengthened cooperation with women's NGOs in Montenegro in order to act jointly through the Informal Women's Network. As a result, they have increased the amount and quality of information out there, as well as raised the level of public awareness. They have created conditions (information and instruments) for advocacy to prevent serious violence against

women. The site is used as an advocacy tool, for example to monitor enforcement of an article in the criminal code that is used to punish acts of domestic violence. They published a Watchdog Report looking at the implementation of this article in the judiciary, the Ministry of the Interior, and social work institutions in nine cities. They published this data in the Watchdog Report and posted it on STOPVAW. The media showed increased interest and wanted to know more. They were called by international organizations, such as OSCE and USAID, who wanted to know more about it. All of this resulted in strengthening cooperation by government institutions. Because this information was published worldwide, the government felt insecure and asked to cooperate and create a forum for the judiciary, the Ministry of the Interior and social work institutions. The website has also been successful in regional linking and cooperation. Four countries in the Balkans—Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Croatia—jointly translate the STOPVAW newsletter and publish it in their own language.

There are also challenges. Regional linking and cooperation is one. Also, they need to maintain and strengthen cooperation with women's NGOs. they need to influence strategies to combat violence against women, and one way is to create a database necessary for any initiatives. They promote the site at different levels—to the public, within the NGO sector, within governmental bodies/organizations and to international organizations. SOS Hotline Podgorica also promotes the website in every brochure it produces. Translating the site from English into the native language is also another challenge. It is hard for women to use the site because it is in English, but for now, they can use it as a tool to send information out of our own country. As soon as we succeed in translating the main pages, they can reach more women. But thus far, they have already reached many women in their country.

**Yuliya Gureyeva**, the National VAW Monitor for Azerbaijan, spoke next. She began by saying she was doing gender studies and needed to collect a lot of information for her research. She found it was difficult to find information on Azerbaijan while abroad and realized how good it would be to have such information on women in Azerbaijan on the Internet. Upon returning home, she discovered that Azerbaijan Gender Information Center launched such a website and joined this organization to assist in its development and expansion.

Yuliya introduced her organization, the Azerbaijan Gender Information Center (AGIC). It was started in 2002 with the financial support of Open Society Institute –Azerbaijan and is the first informational, analytical, bibliographical and documentation center of the women's movement in the territory of the South Caucasus. The AGIC project is an example of a successful coalition of the Azerbaijan Women Organizations:

- AREAT Research Center
- Association of Creative Women, Baku
- Azerbaijan Association of Organizational and Technical Development, Baku
- Mingechaur Women Youth Center “Shams”

- Hudat Center of Youth Programs Development

The purpose of the AGIC is to create and maintain the National Gender Portal in three languages (Azeri, Russian, English) and to develop the national strategy in the field of gender and information communicative technologies. The AGIC website receives about 70 visitors every day from Russia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Turkey, U.S., Germany, France, Canada, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Israel, Iran, Georgia, Australia, United Arab Emirates, Poland, Greece, etc. There are 365 subscribers to the newsletter from CIS countries, as well as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, US, Israel, Turkey, Germany.

In terms of achievements, AGIC is a key point of the information flow on Women' Issues in Azerbaijan. AGIC had become the point of cooperation between Eastern Europe and Central Asian Women's Organizations. AGIC is a source of information for international organizations, and the UN report on indexes of human development in Azerbaijan 2005 is prepared using AGIC's materials.

AGIC has four main directions of networking:

1. News (Eastern European Net [www.REWIND.Net](http://www.REWIND.Net); Central Asian Net [www.gendergateway.uz](http://www.gendergateway.uz) , Turkey [www.womensenews.org](http://www.womensenews.org) )
2. Violence against Women ([www.STOPVAW.org](http://www.STOPVAW.org))
3. Peace building (Coalition 1325, Women's Appeal for Peace Journal)
4. Development of Women Businesses (network of business women in Azerbaijan, to broaden in the future to the Central Asia)

They have received feedback from others about their work:

*"I am working on the project on involvement of women to the non-violent conflict resolution in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. We women have to exchange our experience, gain new knowledge and skills, and your website is a crucial tool to reach these goals."* Isabekova Zeinura, Foundation For Tolerance International, Kyrgyzstan.

*"THANK YOU for information you're regularly sending to me! They are very (!) interesting and extremely helpful."* Azer S. Hasanov, Regional Development Officer, Oxfam, Tajikistan.

There is still a digital divide between regional and peripheral NGOs in Azerbaijan and between "Advanced" and "Beginner" NGOs.

Future plans include: close cooperation with mass media for joint activities within 16 Days Against Violence Campaign, preparation of the series of TV programs on Violence against Women, translation of the STOPVAW website into Azeri language and website presentations in the regions of Azerbaijan, and the creation of a regional network to exchange experience on drafting and lobbying Violence against Women Law in Azerbaijan.

AGIC believes that new informational technologies, such as Internet, can and should be used for women's benefit to make difference and assist in addressing gender-based violence issue. These new tools open wider opportunities for

networking, exchange of information and experience and raising awareness among wider public and state officials.

The AGIC website is at [www.gender-az.org](http://www.gender-az.org).

**Lin McDevitt-Pugh**, the Program Director at the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement began by remarking how this had been a very interesting presentation because she was an information specialist. Her passion is to get information out in modern ways, through the internet, as well as through methods like Juliet's, using other technologies.

Lin stated that she works in a 70-year old organization, which began as the place where the women's suffrage movement collected its documents and made them available to a broader public. They collected piles of information and brought them home. The library evolved into a repository of the women's movement in the Netherlands and around the world. The IIAV was one of the first archives and libraries in the Netherlands to use the Internet to make its information accessible. Lin organized the 1998 Know-How Conference of 380 women's information specialists from 86 countries, in Amsterdam (the 2006 Know How Conference will be held in Mexico in August 2006). It was an opportunity to learn, especially from people whose countries did not have libraries, about how they were using information on the ground. Many different approaches are used, from street theater to audio to publication in magazines and newspapers. As program director she has been privileged to work with people around the world to develop new ways of using technical and theoretical knowledge to make a difference for women around the world. She does this by working with groups of women that are involved in NGOs, and finding ways to combine the strengths of the women into an information and communication strategy.

An example of such an activity is the Women's Information Technology Transfer ([www.witt-project.net](http://www.witt-project.net)). WITT trains Eastern European women to use technology to advance the position of women. The group is made up of leaders women's communication and activist organizations in 6 countries, and together they have developed a training program, a website for use during trainings. To know exactly what training is needed, the WITT Focal Points (presently there are Focal Points in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia) carry out a detailed needs assessment of the women's ngos they will be training. This provides an important insight not only into what the focus of the training must be, but also helps the group design the website in such a way that the groups they are working with can use it.

The IIAV operates a database with up-to-date information on where to find women's information organizations throughout the world— at present 400 organizations in 120 countries. The URL is [www.iiav.nl/mapping](http://www.iiav.nl/mapping). The database is also available as a CD-ROM (for more information, write to [pr@iiav.nl](mailto:pr@iiav.nl)). It is updated regularly and its purpose is to create access to the vast wealth of information that is available in the world on the position of women.

Challenges include keeping the possibilities within financial limits, finding finances and on the practical level, communication is always a challenge. Language, tradition, methodology differ immensely.. Another challenge is to ensure that, as an information organization, you are ahead of the needs curve and are preparing the projects the potential reader needs, before they know they need them. The IIAV is presently establishing the European Sexuality Resource Center. Its purpose is to be both a service for the customers of the IIAV, who need more than what the IIAV can offer in their search for resources on sexuality, and a service for people who not yet found their way to the resources on sexuality available at the IIAV. The project will be a cooperation at one level between key libraries in the Netherlands and HIV/aids organizations, gay rights, anti violence against women, reproductive rights and reproductive health organizations. Europe is bigger than the Netherlands, which is a tiny country. At a second level, the Dutch cooperation will partner with European networks, thus providing a service in many languages to many Europeans.

**Juliet Were Oguttu** is a Programme Officer with Isis-WICCE. She spoke about *Women's activism in the face of armed conflict and the role of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)*. Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) is a global action-oriented women's organisation that emulates "Isis", the ancient Egyptian goddess of 'Wisdom, Creativity and Knowledge' to promote justice, equality and mutual relationship between women and men. Isis-WICCE was founded in 1974 in Geneva, Switzerland with the purpose of promoting cross-cultural exchange of skills and information to contribute towards women's transformation. The organisation relocated to Africa in 1993, to tap the voices of African women, while linking their issues and concerns to the debates and campaigns taking place at the international level.

Through its values of Justice, Equality and Fairness, the organisation envisions an informed society that values and ensures women's rights, in order to realize their capacities and potential. Isis-WICCE's mission is to promote justice and empowerment of women through documenting violations of women's rights and facilitating the exchange of skills and information to strengthen women's capacities, potential and visibility.

Isis-WICCE's framework of operation includes a human rights approach, as inspired by the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, as well as a results-based approach, as directed by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Isis-WICCE decided to focus on the issue of armed conflict given that Africa, as a continent, had been marred by armed conflict for several years. And whereas a lot of documentation about these conflicts had been documented, there was no mention of the role of women in armed struggles, as well as the violations women encountered in the process. Isis-WICCE therefore set out to provide gender disaggregated data through the documentation of women's realities. The aims were to allow women to tell their stories about war, provide development workers with the correct data for better planning for women war survivors, to expose the atrocities and create awareness about the need for accountability and redress to women's plight.

Isis-WICCE used a variety of tools to investigate and document what happened to women during armed conflict, including tape recorders, video cameras, and still cameras. Thus, they were able to provide both audio and visual testimonies of the physical, mental, psychological and economic consequences of war on women.

Through their work, they documented the effects of sexual violence on women's lives, which included ruptured uteruses, vasico vaginal fistulae, sexually transmitted infections; the loss of homes and forced displacement, lack of appropriate clothing and other basic necessities of life, as well as impoverished living. Maiming and mutilation also took place during armed conflicts. One example that Juliet provided was the chopping off of women's lips as a punishment due to the stereotype that "*women talk too much.*" Perpetrators also targeted the wives of administrative officers by amputating their limbs. Not only was there great loss of life, but others were also forced to commit murder: "*While in captivity, even shy girls were forced to murder those condemned to die. They had to kill while others were looking on.*"

Gang rape was common, and one woman was gang raped by 21 men; she finally died of HIV/AIDS. Girls and women experienced other forms of sexual abuse and harassment: "*Later all the girls that were abducted and defiled or raped were married off to rebel leaders or used for general sexual service to rebels. Some commanders were reported to have 4 to 5 wives while the rebel leader himself had over 30 wives at any one time.*" Consequently, many women suffer from reproductive and health problems: "*.... I was 30 years old... six soldiers found me hiding and raped me one after another .... This lasted for about three hours. I could not talk. My relatives discovered me later, soaked in blood, urine, feces and men's semen. I was torn everywhere and developed backache. Before I recovered, I was again gang raped at a military checkpoint. This time 15 soldiers raped me. This left me shattered. I was once again torn to an extent that I could not control my biological functions. The cervix was dislocated and the uterus started hanging out. ... I have to push it back in. My vaginal part and anus are separated by just a thread of flesh and when I get diarrhea, I defecate from both the front and behind. Oozing of water and blood has continued up to today despite the medical treatment I obtained. The fluid is sometimes mixed with pus .... I use a small pad. The men say I am not fit for them and hence I do not get satisfied ... I cannot deliver without professional assistance.*" Women lived in areas that were isolated with very poor infrastructure and had no form of access to any communication channels. Some, due to the traumatic experiences, poor health and high level of poverty, could not even go to church or any village meetings.

Juliet noted that their engaging in activism in armed conflict was sparked due to their experience talking to the women and listening to such shocking and depressing stories. It gave them the passion to act and mobilize other parties to do something immediately. They packaged the findings using different ICTs to attract different actors to respond to the needs of survivors of conflict.

The medical professionals came on board after listening to a fifteen-minute audio tape of extracts of women's testimonies relating to the sexual and

reproductive health problems. As a result, the doctors carried out a medical intervention where women and girls were able to access treatment and surgery. They, in addition, requested Isis-WICCE to develop a video documentary on 'Women, War and Trauma' a tool they have utilised to raise awareness amongst the Ministry of Health decision makers on the impact of trauma on survivors of war.

Isis-WICCE also involved government machinery to launch the findings and commit themselves to specific actions. Government machinery joined Isis-WICCE in a fact finding mission and, as a result, provided building materials for survivors of war who had pathetic shelter.

Isis-WICCE involved survivors to justify the findings and allow them to tell their own stories as "a shame them approach." As a result, the media picked up on the stories and continued the debate. Mission representatives also became involved. The Ambassador of the Republic of Germany in Uganda addressed the crisis of the basic needs of internally displaced persons by providing blankets, saucepans, drugs, plates, etc.

Isis-WICCE has a long-term strategy to involve bilateral agencies and alternative mediums of communication. Isis-WICCE, in collaboration with UNIFEM, produced 'A Lingering Pain,' an ICT tool targeting behavioral change. They also used radio talk shows at the local and national levels, as well as radio drama skits, to sustain the debate. They used dramatic performance to take the message to those who cannot access radio and television. They electronically packaged information to expose the atrocities to the rest of the world, to expand the advocacy constituency to influence at the global level, and provide information to other key actors through the Isis-WICCE website (<http://www.isis.or.ug>) and listserves.

Isis-WICCE also works to influence the International Criminal Court. ICC officials had claimed that women in Northern Uganda were not ready to testify. Isis-WICCE provided a video to WIGJ of women testifying, which prompted WIGJ to organize a fact-finding mission. They used video recording to capture the survivors' stories. They developed a DVD clip, "Synergy Moving the Agenda of Gender Equality." This was evidence of women's efforts to advocate for women's justice and was shared with court officials. The ICC has since then included women in their evidence collection.

Isis-WICCE has received awards in recognition of its work. It received the Civil Society Exhibition Gold Award (2000) for having ably linked its activities to policy issues. It also received the Gender and ICT Award (2003) from the Global Knowledge Partnership and Association of Progressive Communications for its unique approach to using ICTs in mobilising resources to address the concerns of women in situations of conflict.

There still remain many challenges:

- Collection of many audio and visuals which are still not yet processed
- Communication tools are very expensive to maintain and acquire
- Poor infrastructure
- Lack of funding
- Poverty

- Language
- Illiteracy
- New, emerging conflicts

The way forward will require consideration of the numerous gender issues that affect women to access, contribute and use ICTs for development. There must be an opportunity to choose what technology to use, especially for the poor, isolated and illiterate. There must be some consultations with these vulnerable people on how they would like to communicate, to whom and what they would like to communicate. It is only through this approach that they will be able to develop their own content that will be relevant to their needs.

Juliet ended by stating that, the resources of the global information society seem to concentrate on access to new technology without addressing the gender issues that continue to hinder the marginalized women from accessing the technology for their empowerment. For women, there is still a lack of skills, affordability, appropriateness in terms of the type of technology and content, language, etc.

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