

In Conversation: Jane Bennett talks with *Sally Shackleton*, director of Sweat (Sex Workers' Education and Advocacy Taskteam, Cape Town) about her work with Women'sNet, the first feminist e-technology hub in South Africa

JB: I was trying to think the other day about when I first began to understand what the World Wide Web was maybe about 10 years ago no maybe a bit longer 15 (mmm) I can remember the office I was in, and I can remember Jenny [Radloff] saying, "There are things called search engines, Jane," [both laugh], "here they are! Yahoo, ..." [laughs]

SS: Remember when Yahoo was the major.... things have transformed quite a bit; I remember when I was at POWA, I had the email account for the organisation, so I ran the research centre, and that's what we also used to do, we did press-clippings, we cut things out of newspaper and stuck them onto pages [both laugh] for people to refer to.

JB: And that was when, that was in the '90s?

SS: Ja, that was in the '90s, the early '90s, and the Resource Centre was only established in about '95, and we had only one email address for the whole organisation, and you printed out the email and got it to the right person, and I also remember when the possibility of communicating with someone who needed assistance or who was someone helping someone changed, that was pretty incredible, it was possible to communicate really fast with information, and cell phones also changed all that.

JB: Yes!

SS: We used to work with a pager. (JB: Yes! I remember working with Rape Crisis, we also had pagers); we had the pager in a little suitcase which had a reference list in it, and a file so you could give people a number of a shelter, or whatever they needed, and you had to be near a landline, so if you were on duty, you had to stay home all the time (JB: and you couldn't take your pager out, say, into a restaurant, because you were afraid you might not be able to hear it, there was no technology that said: hey! Someone's trying to get you!)

SS: It was quite an elitist thing those pagers [JB laughs]; I always felt quite sophisticated when I was carrying mine (JB: I was terrified of mine); I do

remember the little heartbeat when you heard it, and you would think, is there a quiet place, or I used to live in a cottage outside the house, and I used to have to creep in so I wouldn't wake everyone up, so I could make the phone call, and sit in the passage, with someone at 3.00 in the morning.

JB: And all those calls which were at 3.00 in the morning! I remember sitting with my back to the wall. And you were there for a couple of hours. (SS: [laughs...] and your ear got all warm and sticky [both laugh] **JB:** and you were terrified to move the phone from one ear to the other in case you missed something... so you started at POWA, but then, when... because Women'sNet started in the mid-'90s, '97?

SS: Ja, I was peripherally involved with Women'sNet then, because Women'sNet initially aimed to be a kind of clearinghouse for information (**JB:** that's right, that's right; I remember the first banner, with the sun); ja, wasn't that great? It was the sun, bright yellow; so because I was the information officer and managed the resource centre at POWA, I was interested in the establishment of a women's clearinghouse for information. And of course organisations then didn't have websites, their own websites, so they needed a space to send information to, information that could become part of the World Wide Web, and be available to others. And they could advertise their services, put up their "lessons learned" for others to read and think about...

JB: And my memory is, we were still in that space where there was a tremendous amount of not simply goodwill but absolute commitment to the new government, and there was a sense that if people were working on issues of women's rights and gender equality (SS: ja, ja), there needed to be hubs for information. I remember... do you remember Michelle Friedman and Phelisa Nkomo, and later Sisonke [Msimang], doing a fantastic job running a programme on Gender and Organisational Development and the idea was to have a radical engagement with government on setting up policies around employment equity and gender justice, gender and race... (SS: you didn't need to convince anyone. And now it's completely different. Now we have to work on transformation in those spaces), yes.

SS: Whereas then we thought people were transformed, the whole government was "transformed," and what was needed was information and opportunities to connect and spaces to work things, to collaborate (**JB:** and Women'sNet was right in the centre), and Women'sNet was a real hub. (**JB:** So Women'sNet was you and...?)

SS: When I joined Women'sNet, it was Sonja Boesak and Rebecca Holmes and Women'sNet was based in SANGONET. So when Natasha Primo joined us as Coordinator, we decided to separate from them and become an independent organisation which was a difficult process, it always is when baby organisations leave the nest of being hosted by another organisation. But how it started for me, really was that I joined Women'sNet on a project, putting online a manual that the Foundation for Human Rights had developed called *Making Women's Rights Real* and I coordinated that, I loved that manual, it was so nice to be part of a product, something concrete, and my job was to put that online, I had to think about how it the logic of that could unfold, how it should look online, I dreamed in HTML.

JB: How did you learn HTML? Did you teach yourself?

SS: Ja... (JB: Wow) Everyone at Women'sNet did that! Because everyone at Women'sNet was a gender activist. We were not ICT people; what we had to do was have a real affinity for the work of creating spaces for women to collaborate together. So we just had to learn the technology as a tool to be able to do that, not to engage with it just for its own sake. It was the tool we needed to get the job done. But we also had insight into what it would mean for individual organisations to do the same thing; we knew that getting used to e-communication was a difficult task and that it took up a lot of time, that it required a certain kind of thinking and that it required help, and that you needed to collaborate in order to put things into the WWW that worked. And we also had insight into how gender affected your ability to take up the technology, that it was harder if you were a woman to get access, to get the skills. So I think that that was made the difference at Women'sNet: we had insight into what it was like to learn from the ground up, from scratch, how to use the thing. And what that thing meant, how it affected your work. So I became the Information Coordinator after I worked on the manual, I think we called it the A-Z of Women's Rights, and Jenny Radloff was on the board as were a whole lot of other interesting people and we got to work to work with APC [the Association of Progressive Communicators]. And that was important for thinking through the fact that the WWW was global; we had to learn to think "globally."

JB: And learn how to imagine the "global" as a horizon. Because it is almost unimaginable. It's about huge pockets of privileged "knowing" and massive "emptinesses" where people's experience is lived, and about multilingualism, and policies about the ownership of cyberspace...

SS: Yes, and that gave us, working with APC, immense opportunities to work with different people across the world who were facing exactly those challenges – about privileged access, and who owns what – and we were sharing those challenges.

JB: And Women'sNet always had a very strong commitment to maximising the use of e-space around challenging violence against women, yes? It's been one of its core activisms – I know there has been a range of themes around which projects were organised – the Rights one for sure, and information about Sexual Health – but the ways in which Women'sNet thought through the meaning of violence against women on the ground, and the potential for violence against women in cyberspace, while still working for the value of ICTs as part of feminist work are powerful; I'm thinking of the Take Back the Tech! campaign...

SS: Ja, I think that coming from POWA, it was easy to see how Women'sNet could be part of a real response to violence against women, and it was also possible to Women'sNet to help coordinate engagement with, say, a particular piece of legislation, there was a lot of legal reform work going on in the late 90s (JB: the Domestic Violence Act; SS: the Termination of Pregnancy Act). But the other interesting thing which happened was that, yes you could send out information and so on by email, but email also became a way someone could write and reach out for help. So if you were experiencing abuse, or you had a family member in that situation, you could look online and contact someone; you could find someone to help you, with legal advice. And what informally happened was that I would start replying to some of those emails, and I started to think about both the intimacy and the distance which email gives you. You can write a really intimate letter to someone in the hope that they would respond to you, and you get an answer that was in fact giving you a sense of being heard, and you didn't have to present yourself, your actual body, and your history, and all the baggage that you bring into a space. (JB: and you didn't have to deal with the mobility thing – the how do I get there? How do you get there? SS: Yes)

So, new meanings for safety, and new meanings for finding support and connection. And then, that contradiction arises – there is a lot of fear about young women's access to the internet, even fearmongering, in schools or homes, about limiting girls' and young women's access to the internet for fear that they will come across someone who will abuse them. So just like violence

against women which limits our ability to walk safely about the community, or to be alone, or to occupy public space, the same thing happens in e-space. Women's freedoms are curtailed by people who would close off spaces to them, either through policy – or through practice, harassing women online, the invasion of privacy, just like it happens on the streets in some ways.

JB: And internalised, too... institutionalised. So it happens in families where parents are wary about girls' access to the internet, or schools monitoring what is seen when. And the corollary – schools bewildered by what to do, in policy terms, around cyberbullies....

SS: And some of that is about older generations just not knowing technologies and their capacities in the same way as their daughters, sons, nieces and nephews. There's a lot of fear because they are just not in control of the technology, they just don't really understand it, they don't know how their children manage to get the information they do [both laugh]. There is a lot of control exercised over young people, and I think that is not the right way to go; we need to empower, rather than disempower younger people. We need to enable their access to information and their ability to absorb, be assertive. If my daughter or niece was harassed or yelled at on the street, I would want her to be strong enough to have a response, to yell right back, and to seek help if she needed it in that situation. I want her to stand her ground, and I would want her to be able to do the same online, to activate a response, to join others in response, I love the Holler Back! Online. I love the way young women find to defy, to have a little revolution when they need to, and to find one another, it's really cool.

JB: And Women'sNet itself, it changed? It stopped being a clearinghouse, I would say, round about the 2000s – this is just someone looking in from the outside, as a beneficiary of the work – it stopped being a repository, about holding documents. It became more about campaigns....

SS: Ja, it became a space for initiating and pushing and encouraging people to become interactive, and I think the power of information became more and more sharply focused. And the difference between those who had access to it got wider, it seems, and it was so clear how technology could facilitate a change in that. So if a new piece of legislation was being discussed, or a particular process around women's rights was in play, technology could be used to get people together to build discussion and insight and strategy. It wasn't just that you got to read the document, but that it was possible to

voice an opinion, to suggest a change and strengthen it. You could share what you thought of it and create spaces in which in both a live and an online way you could organise. And we had different processes for that – I think it was in 2004 we started the Digital Stories processes, and that was an opportunity to have voices that were marginalised to take digital shape. We could debunk the myth of the voiceless; I think it's a really ridiculous myth... So the Digital Stories space was a really important innovation (JB: and it also debunked the idea that only sophisticated e-literate people could create a digital, visual, clip of information)... And it was a powerful training tool. We had done trainings before that on, perhaps, how to write your CV, or “the magical thing that email is” but I have never seen people as assertive with technology as when they worked with digital stories. It was really just about the machine being a tool – “I need to tell something really important”; “my voice – that's important.” So it was older women, and marginalized women, saying, “Teach me how to do it so it looks like that! That is how I want it to look.” And there was also something magical about seeing yourself reflected back at you that way – a different relationship to mirroring, and ownership. And there was so little of that, at that point anyway. Now, there's the “I-Stories” and the “South African narrative” are popular, almost commercialised.

JB: But now, it's also the post-Facebook/Facebook modality of an artificial invitation to “have your story” but of course that story is entirely prescribed in terms of what you can speak, some things matter: where do you live? Are you in a relationship? And when were you born? The moments of salience – public salience – are globalised and you have a timeline, a line! But the Digital Stories have a complete different relationship to the chaos of experience (SS: Mmmm).

SS: If I think about it now, and I think back to that time, we were incredibly arrogant about technology! There was nothing we thought we couldn't master (JB: well, of course there wasn't [both laugh]!). Because basically Lerato and I went on a course that Engender Health did as part of their programme and they invited us to attend it, and we decided after attending a four-day course on Digital Story-creation that we could do it ourselves, (laughs), and we did. And the difference is that we weren't in the training course as experts; we were with the people who were there, we worked it out *with* people. Of course we had more advantage with other people in terms of familiarity with computers, but we had had to learn that, it wasn't a “naturalised” skill for

us and we could show other people how it worked. I just think now that my focus isn't exclusively on ICTS – well I guess it never was exclusively on ICTS – but I think that the fact that Women'sNet was a *women's* organisation helped us to keep the role of the technology in the right place – it was a means to a feminist end.

JB: But you haven't lost that by moving into Sweat [Sex Workers' Education and Advocacy Taskforce]?

SS: No, in fact, I think lots of organisations have learned from Women'sNet about how to integrate ICTs into their work and I see how important and integral e-space has become to our strategies that we hardly even notice how far we've travelled. We use SMS-technology here to reach out to sex workers, we use a website, we have an internal communications platform, we manage our organisational accounts using ICTs, we don't even think about it any more. But in those days, it was really about helping organisations be conscious about the meaning of technology and helping them make decisions about that which made sense in relation to their own goals... and also decisions about information, and communication... and the politics of communication are part of all our work – who is speaking, who is in the room and who is not, what is the language in which we are expressing our ideas, what level of privacy is required and how should that be shaped, who has access to this space, and is it safe... We consider all those things when we talk directly to people. And those are the things relevant to online communication. The same level of political consciousness we use about direct communication is what is needed when we use technological tools. I think it is interesting how technology differently enables people – so that with sex workers, I have noticed that cell phones carry a value which can be exchanged for something else – someone needing resources such as food or transport can use access to the phone for the exchange.

The other thing is that access to a communication tool, in the work I do now, can be a matter of life and death. We've gotten calls (we have a 24-hour helpline service and a "please-call-me service" so you can communicate for free if you have a cell phone) from the back of a police van, saying that they are being taken to a police station, that they have just been beaten, that they are afraid. And we are able to respond. We can be with that person, in that way. Sometimes it's frustrating, we have little information; just previously to getting that call, we had heard of a case where a sex worker died in the

back of a police van, and the police were not taking the sex workers into the station, they were holding them in a shed behind the police station, so we knew she was on her way there, and we were phoning but they were saying, “No, no-one’s been brought in here” but we knew she was en route, that she might be at the back, so we phoned the connections we have in the Ministry of Police and she was released. Because we knew. Just somebody knowing that that was happening to her made a difference. So I think that the awareness that we have about the possibility of communicating when we are in trouble, whether that trouble is emotional or immediate physical danger, being able to say so, is important; the technology puts people within earshot of you even though you may be so isolated where you are.

JB: But it’s the same principle as you were working with at Women’sNet – that it’s about the fundamentals of feminist work. Because you could be in the back of the police van, and calling, and unless you are calling somebody who understands the value of who you are, the meaning of the brutality that happening, unless that’s someone seeing you, really seeing you, that call goes nowhere (SS: ja)... there are a lot of people you could call, and they would say, “Okay, fine, you stay in that van!” The call has to be to someone who already has the political consciousness about what is going down and why the call matters.

SS: Ja, ja. I think that looking at Cape Town NGOs, there’s so much innovative and feminist use of technology. Rape Crisis uses technology as a marketing tool; you can go to their website and buy the little hearts, it makes philanthropy a little easier especially for South Africans who don’t have much of a culture of a philanthropy (JB: [laughs] Yes, it’s ‘Where is this money going to go if I give it to you?’ SS: (laughs): “You can’t buy a drink with this!” JB: [laughs] Or, even more weirdly, if I give you this today, you’ll just ask me again tomorrow! As if that’s a bad thing! [Both laugh] SS: You will need it tomorrow... it’s not like the five rand is going to go that far; perhaps if you don’t want them to ask tomorrow, you should give a bit more today [both laugh]).

But I think Rape Crisis have also used technology in a innovative way; they’ve created a video tool to help people find their way through the criminal justice system. I remember doing court support at POWA and how difficult it was to tell people what it was actually like to be in a court room, where do people sit, what do you call people, where do you wait, how do you negotiate

your way through an alienating and traumatising system? So I find that organisations have found really interesting technological ways of doing things that they used to do anyway, but with safer, more comfortable approaches, and that is the thing to note: we know what needs to be done, we have the skills – technologies offer us a little bit more, it gives us an edge, it means we can work with people in a way that is really prepared and respectful and real. You can print out the forms someone needs to get a protection order, so that when she sees them again, they are familiar, she's in charge of what needs to be done. The control is with her.