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Ruth Carter

NETWORKING: THE FEMINIST'S SECRET WEAPON

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I would not have known about this issue of *Woman of Power*, or indeed about the existence of the magazine at all, if someone, somewhere, had not had access to a list containing my name and address. The mailing with the call for papers arrived at my office, so I can be reasonably sure that the list was one in which I participated voluntarily and in a professional capacity, rather than as a result of driving a car or buying an airline ticket. Perhaps it was the participants list of the conference on Girls and Science and Technology that I went to in Ann Arbor last summer; perhaps it was the subscription list of the newsletter *Feminists in Science and Technology* of the Science and Technology Task Force of the National Women's Studies Association. How clever, I thought, of them to find me, a British woman over 3,000 miles away, whose interests so closely coincide with this issue. Such is the power of networking.

When personal organisers first appeared on the market my best friend suggested that they were the feminist's secret weapon and she offered me one for my birthday. I declined because, in common with many other women, I felt that my personal and professional responsibilities had already over-organised my life. But I am inclined to think that networking is the feminist's secret weapon. Its power and strength are most

evident to people who are part of tiny minorities. None are more isolated than feminists in science and technology and I firmly believe that we should exploit our networks to the full.

What are the advantages ? Maintaining frequent and friendly contact, providing professional advice and support, learning of new projects, initiatives and sources of funding, hearing of employment opportunities, keeping abreast of legislative changes, re-affirming sisterhood, to name but half a dozen. Men seem to have known about networking for centuries, hence "jobs for the boys" and "the old school tie". It's time for us to employ their strategies and use them even more effectively for our own purposes.

How do we do it ? We've already begun by getting into groups at meetings and exchanging names and addresses and personal contacts; someone takes on the task of co-ordination. Thus each of us, with minimal effort, becomes a node in a network which may extend around the world, linking up with other networks that have originated elsewhere. We belong to the women's caucuses of the professional scientific and engineering societies, to Women Into Computing groups, to women's studies associations, to professional women's societies. We support conferences on feminist topics within our specialist fields and are delighted to

meet each other in workshops and seminars. We may never meet but correspond, until recently with paper and ink in newsletters and journals, but now, perhaps, via electronic mail.

The rampant technology of computer networking empowers women with access to them from laboratories, universities, companies or home. For example, those of us with access to BITNET or JANET, the American and British inter-university computer networks, can communicate with each other internationally and regularly, yet incur no personal expense. We can teach our sisters the skills to take advantage of such facilities, and make it rewarding by setting up interesting conferences, conversations and bulletin boards within the computer systems. We can exchange our work and organise meetings more quickly by electronic mail. Surprisingly, this apparently impersonal medium can often be used warmly and personally, particularly by women, nurturing friendship and sisterhood amongst people who have never met and are unlikely to do so.

My own work in the British Open University involves the employment of adjunct professors to offer distance teaching in a wide range of engineering disciplines to adults who are studying for degrees. Since the Open University began 20 years ago it has been acknowledged that our students work in isolation and their attempts to form self-help groups have been fostered

institutionally. Only recently, however, has it been recognised that their professors, too, are isolated. The few women teaching engineering are an extreme case in point.

In the region where I am based there are about 100 adjunct professors teaching engineering and computer science, of whom only 12 are women ( a number that sometimes seems high by comparison with regions which have not made special efforts to recruit women staff). At the beginning of the year the 12 of us met in my office. The relief that the isolation might be over at last was palpable, as were the liveliness of the exchange of views on our isolation and the warmth of feeling between us. We continue to keep in touch by infrequent meeting and news-sheet, with occasional additional electronic input from the four women who have access to computer networks. We offer each other help and advice about our work and our position in male-dominated fields and sisterly support. Through the presence of my name on international mailing lists, others in the group are developing overseas contacts according to their interests.

We are sustained and empowered by belonging to a network and can embrace our sisters in the same way. Networking is definitely the feminist's secret weapon.