

Mobilizing Women for Advocacy:

**Creating The Women's Lens on  
Global Issues National Action  
Network**

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The Women's Lens on Global Issues Project (WLG I) was launched in September of 1998 to explore ways of channeling the enthusiasm, commitment, and vision of U.S. women into effective advocacy for policies and programs appropriate to an interdependent world. The Project was initiated to address the lack of a national structure or organization that allows U.S. women to express their concerns about the lives of women around the world, and links issues faced by those women and women in the United States.

The first phase of the Project focused on two main goals: To identify issues and messages with salience for U.S. women, and to identify potential sources of leadership to marshal activism in cities throughout the United States. The work of this phase included public opinion research on women's attitudes towards global issues, as well as convenings of groups of women in a number of U.S. cities to gather qualitative information on attitudes and organizing. This work was completed in spring of 2001.

The WLG I Project's three-year report concluded that a national women's action network could increase the congruence between the role played by the U.S. in international affairs and the human security issues of a women's lens. It also recommended a long-term development process to make such a network a reality.

This report focuses on the second phase of the Women's Lens work, referred to here as the WLG I Network project. In this second phase, the Women's Funding Network, an alliance of 87 independent organizations that fund programs for women and girls in the United States and around the world, developed and defined the concept and strategy for this national women's action network. The Rockefeller Foundation funded the work of this phase. Pilot projects were initiated in Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles to explore the feasibility of grassroots organizing around local issues that have global linkages, and to develop recommendations for an effective model for this type of organizing.

The experience of this second phase supports the conclusion that women can be a critical force in shaping U.S. engagement in support of a global human security agenda. Women can best be mobilized by a national action network structured as a series of closely integrated alliances between existing national advocacy groups and grassroots, issue-based groups working on the local level.

## **Experience Confirms Significant Numbers Of Women Ready to be Mobilized**

The on-the-ground experience of the WLGI Network project confirms a key finding of the first phase research: Significant segments of U.S. women are ready to be mobilized in support of a human security agenda.

The WLGI Project found that U.S. women support global engagement in response to “unarmed threats to human security”—and they support it more strongly than men. Both women and men share a commitment to international cooperation, but women are more likely than men to support international programs that meet basic human needs—promotion of health, protection of human rights and the environment—and programs that empower women. This support is motivated by a combination of ethical or religious attitudes and enlightened self-interest<sup>1</sup>— long before September 11, women saw the connection between the safety of their homes and communities and conditions in other countries.

Research findings also indicated that a third of U.S. women are ready to become advocates, rather than just passive supporters, for United States engagement in the world that is consistent with this women’s lens. This third includes 12 percent of women who are “Connected and Ready”—already active on international issues—and 22 percent who are “Waiting in the Wings”—not yet actively engaged in politics or community mobilization, but having similar attitudes and values. The work of the WLGI Network project confirmed that these women really are out there and ready to be activated.

In each of the three pilot cities, the local women’s foundation asked women who fit the profile of “Connected and Ready” and “Waiting in the Wings” to participate in creating an advocacy group addressing a global human security issue with particular resonance for the local area (See Table 1 for summaries by foundation). The women initially invited to participate included largely working women, middle-aged and somewhat younger, diverse in race and ethnicity, from both faith-based and non-faith based organizations. The participant groups eventually broadened the circle of participation to include women who were more diverse than suggested by the research profile, including immigrants and nationals, more ethnic diversity and a greater age range (Table 2 lists participants and their organizations). The experience in Chicago illustrated the potential catalyst role of the “Connected and Ready,” as initial participants brought new women into the core group.

The work of the Network project also revealed another critical dimension in activating women for advocacy on global issues—the importance of including women who were relative neophytes to this form of activism. Atlanta and Chicago both found that new energy was created by involving unaffiliated people and those from small organizations, in addition to those in more established organizations. The enthusiasm that was generated is indicated by the high proportion of women who stayed involved throughout the educational and planning sessions, and who continue to remain involved in the ongoing activities of the Chicago and Atlanta groups. This enthusiasm led the director of the Atlanta Women’s Foundation to ask at the conclusion of the formal work of the Network project, “Where is the third phase? People are waiting!”

There are other indications of women's desire to get involved in international issues, as well. Since September 11, donors have been bombarding the funds of the Women's Funding Network, seeking to make donations specifically to help address the issues facing women in Afghanistan. The Global Fund for Women, in San Francisco, reported a flood of phone calls from individuals concerned about women in Afghanistan. They were already making grants to organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and since September 11 have increased their funding to support Afghan women's groups and meet the immediate needs of women and girls in that already impoverished nation. In addition, The Women's Foundation in San Francisco, created a donor-advised fund with a \$100,000 donation from a single donor. The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights responded to the events of 9/11 with international funding, making eight grants to women-led peace building coalitions, feminist radio and Afghan and other women's advocacy groups.

### **Network Must Link National Advocacy Groups With New Grassroots Groups**

The experience of the WLGJ Network project indicates that women can best be mobilized through a national network that ties existing national advocacy groups to grassroots groups operating at the local level.

Issues at the local level provided the initial impetus for grassroots organizing. Women in Atlanta, for example, had already advocated successfully for changes in the local laws on trafficking. In Chicago, one of the foundation's goals was to raise awareness in Chicago's communities (including participant groups) of the effects of U.S. foreign and international policy on reproductive rights, an issue on which the foundation was already working locally. Because these were issues of significant local concern, the foundations were able to draw participants from a broad range of groups already working on the issue as it affected their city and state.

In the course of their work, all three of the foundations found value in developing relationships with one or more national advocacy groups. Specifically, all of the foundations became members of Women's EDGE (Economic Development and Global Equity), a Washington, DC advocacy organization influencing national policy on behalf of women and girls. This national group has proven critical in alerting women to action points: proposed legislation requiring a response to influence policy decisions, and what legislators offer key points of leverage.

National advocacy groups and grassroots organizations have the potential for highly productive alliances based on complementary skills and roles. The relevant national groups are extremely well informed about issues and advocacy; their Achilles heel has been their lack of connection with the views and power of large numbers of women. While national environmental groups have been extremely successful in activating local communities in support of issues of global importance, the women's advocacy groups have tended to operate within much more limited circles.

There are other national advocacy organizations in addition to Women's EDGE that could work productively with grassroots women's groups. These include:

- InterAction—160 non-profit organizations working internationally.
- Human Rights Watch – the Women’s Rights Division
- INFORM—an independent research organization that examines the effects of business practices on the environment and human health
- The International Women’s Health Coalition
- WEDO (Women’s Environmental and Development Organization)
- The Women’s Global Leadership Program

In addition to their critical role in providing legislative status information and action recommendations to grassroots groups, these organizations have the potential to support education on both issues and approaches to advocacy. They could also organize efforts such as national-level lobbying days involving women from many locations.

### **Women’s Foundations Well-Positioned To Organize Grassroots Groups**

The experience of the three foundations in this second phase WLGI project indicates that women’s foundations provide ideal loci for organizing grassroots groups. Women’s foundations tend to be extremely well connected in their local areas. The Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW), for example, has 16 years of experience in funding and developing programs for Chicago’s women and girls. It has built a network of over 500 grassroots organizations serving and advocating for women and girls. The Foundation also has public respect and recognition among researchers, non-profit organizations, and the business community. The group it assembled for the WLGI Network project, which included CFW grantees, anthropologists, direct service providers in immigrant communities, and reproductive choice advocates with ties to legislators, would have been unlikely to collaborate so closely under any other circumstances.

The Atlanta Women’s Foundation brings strong ties to the media (CNN and national public television), ties with national human rights education programs, and relationships with international advocacy groups. The Los Angeles Women’s Foundation has a history of supporting social change initiatives in health, economic literacy, and a living wage, and has been heavily involved in immigrant and human rights issues related to the impact of trafficking both locally and globally.

This kind of “on the ground” knowledge of their communities positions the women and girls’ foundations to readily identify and reach those women who are “connected and ready,” the women who can serve as catalysts for activating large numbers of women. Because the foundations work with a broad cross-section of women, they can assure the diversity of membership that the Network project found valuable in building understanding of the relationships between local and global issues.

As funders, the foundations can command the attention of women who may already have multiple commitments. In addition, foundation staff members are knowledgeable about local and state politics and policymaking, and can provide support in the formative phases of a grassroots group.

## **Focused Group Process, Education, Appropriate Technology Key to Success of Grassroots Groups**

The Network project found that initiating work with a single, locally related issue helped create cohesive, self-sustaining and effective grassroots advocacy groups. A well-focused group process, education on the substance of the local and global aspects of the issue, along with appropriate use of technology, was key to success in forming and maintaining an effective group, as was appropriate support for group process.

### **Focused Group Process**

By focusing on issues that were already of local concern, the foundations were able to rapidly identify a group of participants with common interests. Once the groups were under way, the women in each city followed a different course. In Atlanta, participating women choose to continue the single-issue focus, allowing them to become well educated about the local and global aspects of an issue on which there had already been significant local organizing. This approach avoided information overload, as well as sidestepping potentially divisive debates on priority setting. In Los Angeles, participants had common interests in immigration-related issues but no single focal issue. As a result, considerable time was spent in selecting an issue on which to work. In the case of CFW, the initial focus on reproductive rights expanded into a broader concern for legislation affecting the human rights of women, both in the United States and internationally. Reproductive rights remained a central touchstone of the group's concerns, however.

Given the diversity of the groups and the variety of agendas they brought to the table, maintaining focus required active management. At the same time, the diversity of the individuals and their organizational backgrounds turned out to be key to the success of the group process. Connecting the local with the global was simplified where both were at the table. Participants gained a more holistic understanding of the issues in a variety of communities. The groups also gained entrée to information that can be difficult to obtain; Atlanta found that they could get information on a topic on which people are usually secretive.

Local organizers (i.e. foundation staff) played a key role in convening the groups in each city, organizing initial educational sessions and laying out options for moving forward. They also facilitated group interactions, supporting the development of a cohesive group.

The experience in Los Angeles showed what could happen where a focus on technological approaches took precedence over the participation of a traditional organizer. The group had a chance to learn about new technologies and get active experience with one technology. Significant time was spent on the mechanics of the process. The group would have benefited significantly, however, from a leader who could facilitate substantive discussions and show members how participation would make their current jobs easier or more effective. Comfort with technology allowed the organizers in Chicago and Atlanta to use e-mail and listservs as facilitating tools rather than as ends in themselves.

## **Education**

Effective organizing requires providing participants with many kinds of education. The Chicago and Atlanta foundations provided education for their group participants on both the local and broader global aspects of their issue of focus. Los Angeles had one face-to-face meeting with presenters, but in general sought to use the technology to have group members educate each other. Some members were very active in this regard. This had the unanticipated effect of discouraging other participants, who appeared to feel the time requirements were excessive.

In Atlanta, participants requested education on local and national legislation and existing laws. They also sought to educate themselves on relevant legislation and sponsors, so that they could identify specific points of leverage and action steps. In Chicago, participants wanted to know more about international conventions on human rights to enable their use as a tool for local organizing efforts. Those involved were generally familiar with the local and state legislative processes and potential pressure points, but needed information on opportunities to influence the global situation, including information on:

- The structure of international organizations, such as the U.N. organizations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund
- The roles played by the U.S. in those organizations
- How the U.S. State Department is organized to deal with these organizations
- The Congressional Committees that influence U.S. relationships with these organizations.

Education was as important to maintaining a group's momentum as it was to getting it underway. The Chicago Foundation, for example, invited participants to an ongoing series of educational events, such as screening of relevant films. It recently conducted a training session for a broad group of women on the human rights framework and its application to local grassroots organizing.

## **Appropriate Technology**

The experience of the WLG Network projects indicates that appropriate organizing technology must provide easy access to educational and action tools that are immediately useful to participating women. Technology education and support should be outsourced to an organization with extensive experience in supporting non-profit organizations in advocacy work.

Statistics show that women are now using the Internet to the same extent as men. The Network projects' experience with technology suggests that women will return to technology resources only if they provide information and other tools that they can put to immediate use. This means a website or e-mail list needs to offer five key talking points on an issue of global concern to women, rather than a lengthy position paper. Resources with more depth will be of value to active advocates who need them in their day-to-day work or who have the time to absorb this kind of information. These resources can be provided through links to online sources.

The experience in Los Angeles indicates that technology that provides information and an opportunity to interact will be more successful than technology that simply enables interaction. Women do not want to use technology in place of in-person discussions, but rather as a valuable adjunct. Online discussions using a passive “asynchronous” technology such as Yahoo! groups require no commitment and will tend to become low-priority items for most people. In addition, online decision-making reduces the give and take that leads to development of full group consensus, rather than a decision based on the preferences of a majority.

Both those who are involved in advocacy groups and those who are not can be kept engaged in advocacy by providing them with actionable information—succinct information and specific actions requiring varying degrees of effort (from checking off a box requesting that an e-mail be sent to a legislator on their behalf, to purchasing specific products, to calling an organization with an advocacy message).

E-mail and listservs or other discussion groups can be valuable tools for those actively engaged in advocacy, and are becoming familiar tools to the computer-using population. There are other tools that can support women in advocacy work related to global issues. These include specialized database and e-mail capabilities for tracking “constituents” and for contacting them at critical action points. Organizations such as TechRocks are familiar with these tools and how they can be used in support of non-profit advocacy groups. For new groups with minimal infrastructure in place, such an investment will be far more cost-effective than attempting to create a technology infrastructure on their own or using a technology consultant unfamiliar with advocacy organizations and their needs.

### **A National Organizational Resource Will Facilitate Network Alliances And Leverage Capabilities Already in Place**

Creating a real national network will require modest central leadership resources to facilitate and support alliances among grassroots groups, and between grassroots groups and national advocacy organizations.

To make women’s voices heard on global issues, a small central staff must take on the mission of developing a network of strategic alliances among women’s advocacy groups at all levels. Such a staff would function on two levels:

- Nurturing the growth of nascent grassroots groups and creating links among them
- Working with existing national advocacy groups to show them how to provide the support needed to make grassroots groups strong and effective allies in addressing issues of mutual concern.

A national staff resource can work informally to connect grassroots groups working on similar issues, and to put interested but unaffiliated women in touch with appropriate groups. They can also develop tools to promote cross-fertilization between groups, such as an electronic newsletter, e-mail discussion lists, a website, and leadership meetings.

National advocacy groups have limited experience working with grassroots groups. Central staff can work with them in identifying the kinds of information, training, and materials needed by those grassroots groups to turn them into an effective national advocacy network. National groups need to understand the best ways to educate grassroots participants about the relationship of U.S. policy to women's issues around the globe, about international conventions on human rights, and on potential pressure points within the executive and legislative branches for changing U.S. policy.

Central staff can leverage the capabilities of national advocacy groups, to create a toolkit that can support grassroots groups. In addition to training materials, such a toolkit could include:

- Case studies demonstrating the relationship between global policy and local impacts, which would serve as a motivating tool. These should not be the common fundraising stories about individuals, but stories about communities that present the systemic context, how U.S. policy helps create this context, how the affected women of a community are helping themselves, and what specific actions U.S. women can take to improve the situation.
- Examples of techniques used successfully by grassroots groups, singly or in concert, in advocating policy changes by the U.S. government, international organizations, or corporations.

Finally, central staff could work towards a cooperative media strategy by national women's advocacy groups that will make women's collective voices heard. Such a strategy could make good use of the communication approaches developed by the FrameWorks Institute to move women from passive supporters of good global citizenship by the U.S. to an active advocacy role.

**Table 1: Summary of WLGI Network Projects**

<b>Foundatio n</b>	<b>Atlanta Women's Foundation</b>	<b>Chicago Foundation for Women</b>	<b>Los Angeles Women's Foundation</b>
<b>Focal Issue</b>	Child Sex Trafficking	Reproductive rights	Trafficking
<b>Key Process Elements</b>	<p>Initial meeting: educate and orient to issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local history of child prostitution</li> <li>– Global child sex trafficking</li> <li>– WLGI project</li> </ul> <p>Second meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Policy brief on international trafficking</li> <li>– Summary of relevant Federal legislation.</li> </ul> <p>Participants decided to act to get funds allocated for newly passed legislation, and influence how unallocated funds should be spent. Identified local organizations with connections to international issues, which could be useful in mobilizing other women.</p> <p>Work groups formed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create fact sheets with action steps</li> <li>– Research relevant legislation and sponsors</li> <li>– Seek information and support through public health agencies, nursing departments, women's studies departments</li> </ul>	<p>Initial planning group meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Intro to the WLGI</li> <li>– Overview of background to current reproductive health policy</li> <li>– Discussion of participants involvement in issue</li> </ul> <p>Goals set:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Raise awareness in Chicago's communities of effects of U.S. policy on reproductive rights</li> <li>– Change legislation</li> </ul> <p>Post 9/11, a larger group met to look at broader issues of human security and rights, and the intersections of international policy and human security. Linkages between reproductive rights and human security? Discussed relationship to the CEDAW treaty. Planned meeting with Congressional Representative to discuss CEDAW and other international treaties. Interest in developing more effective communications with policymakers.</p>	<p>Initial meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Discussion on alternative technology options; selection of electronic discussion group format.</li> <li>– Presentation on human trafficking issues.</li> <li>– Discussion on Women's EDGE</li> </ul> <p>Training session on selected technology option</p> <p>Structured online discussion with rounds defined to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Select an issue</li> <li>– Develop a strategy</li> <li>– Develop an implementation plan</li> <li>– Implement the plan</li> <li>– Evaluate the efforts</li> </ul>

<b>Foundatio n</b>	<b>Atlanta Women's Foundation</b>	<b>Chicago Foundation for Women</b>	<b>Los Angeles Women's Foundation</b>
<b>Maintain ing Momentu m</b>	<p>Joined TAPESTRI, coalition of immigrant and refugee advocates. TAPESTRI got grant, hired organizer around issue of international trafficking, developed work plan that includes WLGI Network as a coordinating mechanism for public education and advocacy.</p> <p>Project continues to follow federal legislation on international policy and link it to what is happening locally.</p> <p>Women's Edge held Atlanta training with Dept of Justice and INS on visa procedures for immigrant women who are victims of violence in their home countries or here.</p>	<p>Asked members to invite other interested women—further broadened the base.</p> <p>Continuous learning through participation in related events.</p> <p>Creation of an active listserv where articles and ideas are exchanged—moving to sense of community</p> <p>Training larger circle of women on human rights framework and its application to local organizing.</p> <p>Met with U.S. Representative Jan Schakowowsky to brainstorm effective communication between women and elected representatives, discuss U.N. conventions as organizing tools.</p> <p>Will be looking at reproductive rights within human rights framework.</p>	<p>Lessons learned:</p> <p>Needed high value, low interaction technology, rather than technology requiring high interaction, to maintain momentum.</p> <p>Discussion group technology works best with larger group, and should be conceived as a way to enhance the group experience, not replace in-person meetings.</p> <p>Group needed to be larger, more organizationally diverse to bring new energy.</p>

**Table 2: Participants in WLG I Network Projects and Organization or Community Represented**

<b>Atlanta</b>	<b>Los Angeles</b>
Bobbie Wren Banks Atlanta WAND	Susan Alva CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles)
Apama Bhattacharyya Raksha	Karen Blakeney Chinatown Service Center
Nancy Boothe Feminist Women's Health Center	Deborah Ching Los Angeles Women's Foundation
Nenette Chambliss YWCA of Greater Atlanta	Cindy Cho KIWA (Korean Immigrant Workers Advocate)
Stephanie Davis Atlanta Women's Foundation	Hae Jung Cho CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking)
Shalini Eddens Sister Love (group for HIV positive African-American women)	Grace Choi Los Angeles Women's Foundation
Julie Edelson Planned Parenthood of Georgia	Linda Kite SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy)
Vicki Elise Mothers' Voices (prison advocacy group for ex-offenders)	Patty Murar Los Angeles Women's Foundation
Devon Finley	Marissa Nuncio Sweatshop Watch/Garment Worker Center LA
Venus Gines Dia de la Mujer Latina	Edward Pai Project Technology Consultant
Mary Hill Spelman College Counseling Center	Nikki Tesfai African Community Resource Center
Glory Kilanko Women Watch Africa	
Ayesha Khanna YWCA of Greater Atlanta	

**Atlanta (continued)**

Mary Love  
Arthritis Foundation

Aubra Love  
Black Church and Domestic Violence Initiative

Michelle Ozumba  
GCAPP

Emily Reichman  
Women's Policy Education Fund

Deborah Richardson  
Fulton County Juvenile Justice Fund

Loretta Ross  
National Center for Human Rights Education

Kay Scott  
Planned Parenthood of Georgia

Roslyn Satchel  
DESIST (legal advocacy group relating to child prostitution)

Arek Strzelcki  
TAPESTRI (coalition of immigrant and refugee service providers)

Xuan Nguyen Sutter  
Refugee Women's Network

Patricia White  
Atlanta Women's Foundation

Janelle Yamerick  
Feminist Women's Health Center

**Chicago**

Siobhan Albiol  
Heartland Alliance—Midwest Immigrant & Human Rights Center

Carmen Barroso  
MacArthur Foundation

Susan Bauer  
Community Health Partnership of Illinois

Toni Bond  
African American Women Evolving

Consuella Brown  
Grand Victoria Foundation

Sueylee Chang  
Chinese American Service League

Colleen Connell  
Roger Baldwin Fund of the ACLU

Judy Cottle  
Chicago Foundation for Women—Board of Directors

Barbara Engel  
Chicago Foundation for Women—Alumnae Council

Connie Evans  
WSEP Ventures/Futures

Marcela Garcia  
Bannerman Foundation Fellow

Suzanne Gombrich  
Chicago Foundation for Women, Korean American Women in Need

Sapna Gupta  
Independent Consultant

Rhoda Gutierrez  
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Susan Gzesh  
University of Chicago Human Rights Program

Deborah Harrington  
Woods Fund

**Chicago (continued)**

Betty Holcomb  
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Njoki Kamau  
Women's Center, Northwestern University

Mona Khalidi  
Arab American Action Network

Maria Pequiera  
Mujeres Latinas en Accion

Sima Quraishi  
Community Health Center

Shelley Rastall  
Bahai National Center

Jenny Knauss  
Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health

Anu Kumar  
Formerly of the MacArthur Foundation

Zumreta Kunosic  
Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Community Center

Joyce Love  
The Chicago Project for Violence Prevention

Marcie Love  
Personal PAC

Virginia Martinez  
UIC International Center for Health Leadership  
Development

Simone Mitchell-Peterson  
Chicago Urban League

Allison Nanni  
The Resurrection Project

Camille Odeh  
Southwest Youth Collaborative

Abbie O'Neil  
Chicago 2000 Partners, LLC

Carolyn Pemberton  
ABN AMRO North America, Inc.

Barbara Rose  
S.N. Peck, Builder, Inc.

Leni Silverstein  
Northwestern University

Chivy Sok  
University of Iowa Center for Human Rights

K. Sujata  
Apna Ghar

Steve Trombley  
Planned Parenthood/Chicago Area

Lorena Valles  
Grand Prairie Services

Alaka Wali  
The Field Museum

Leslie Wilson  
Save the Children

Karen Zeitlin  
Girls Best Friend Foundation

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<sup>1</sup> *A Women's Lens on Global Issues: A Three-Year Report 1998 to 2001*. A Women's Lens on Global Issues, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, July 2001.