

Canada and the Hemisphere

An ever-close relationship

For a movement that puts a high priority on transforming attitudes and perceptions, not being able to communicate or access information was a serious handicap. But that was about to change.

Through the CIDA fund, now known as the Gender Equality Program (GEP), each Caribbean government's women's bureau received a computer, software and access to the Internet; and the United Nations Development Fund for Women supplied a manual and training in the new technology. The objectives were to improve communication between bureaus, and to establish information resource centres on gender and development for the benefit of government and non-governmental agencies.

"The Internet enables me to download all kinds of information on gender issues," says Betty Cederboom, who became co-ordinator and head of the National Gender Bureau of Suriname in 1999. "Since I was new on the job, I had a lot of reading to do. I got most of my knowledge on gender from the Internet."

She quickly put that knowledge to work. Guided by information on the roles and tasks of national women's bureaus in other countries, she reorganized her office. With quick access to information and data, she found it easy to write reports and process information requests. Now she can alert colleagues to upcoming events, key issues and a wide variety of information resources. With support from the GEP, she is drafting Suriname's first national gender mainstreaming action plan based, she says, "on a model from Canada which I found on the Net."

One of Betty's jobs is to produce Suriname's national report discussing how the country is implementing the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women. The GEP also funded that report, drafted by a local

NGO for the government. The Internet enabled Betty to do research, participate in the work of drafting, and organize a workshop and conference on the topic. This year's report, now under consideration by the government, has already led to the establishment of a special committee to review all

laws that discriminate against women.

After the August 2000 elections in Suriname, the Internet helped cement government-NGO relations. Betty's office prepared a policy statement on gender equality for the new government, and submitted it to the NGO community for comment via the Internet. The final consensus-based draft was then presented to the minister responsible. Later, NGOs met with the President of Suriname and presented a document outlining their concerns—after sharing the paper with Betty's office.



Passers-by before a mosque in Paramaribo, capital of Suriname. The country's population includes descendants of African, Indian, Javanese and Chinese immigrants.

The Internet and e-mail have made a difference on the ground, helping both government and civil society raise public awareness of gender issues. When the National Olympic Committee ran into difficulty organizing its annual walk to combat poverty, Betty's office decided to help by combining the event with the World March of Women. Again, the Net provided all the information needed. Betty convinced the Olympic Committee to make violence against women one of the themes of the walk, and she helped obtain funding from the UN Development Programme.

Her office used the Internet to co-ordinate the participation of local NGOs—for instance, by arranging media interviews. As it turned out, there was a lot to talk about. On October 14, the day of the five-kilometre walk, Suriname devalued its currency and prices rose for consumer necessities, such as gas and bread. This was a strategic opportunity to increase awareness of poverty and gender equality; and with the new technology provided by CIDA, Betty and her partners were able to take advantage of it.

Betty Cederboom is unequivocal in her praise of this new information and communications tool. "The Internet is the answer to almost all my questions," she says. "It has strengthened our bureau. It makes our work easier." ●



At F.W. Johnson Collegiate in Regina, student Vanessa Klassen shows Prime Minister Jean Chrétien how to use SchoolNet, a public-private partnership connecting Canadian schools and libraries to the Internet.