Gender 2.0: the state of the Women in Open Source community

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Female representation in the Open Source community and particularly in Open Source development is low relative to the proprietary computing industry. This problem has been extensively discussed and there are many projects aimed at mentoring, supporting and motivating women to contribute to the community. The best known example is the LinuxChix project founded in 1999, and it has been more recently joined by women's groups and sub-projects such as Debian Women and Fedora Women.

This paper describes the aims of these groups, and surveys their successes to date and the current state of the various projects and communities.

Women in Open Source groups

Women's low representation in Open Source use, activism and development—even allowing for their lower rate of participation in technology careers—has been a point of discussion for many years. (See for example Kirrily Robert's article "Geek Chicks: Second thoughts" on Freshmeat, from 2000.[2]) The most significant study of women's participation in Open Source was the Free/Libre/Open Source Software: Policy Support reports of 2006[3], which concluded that:

> Women are actively (if unconsciously) excluded rather than passively disinterested... 'hacker' ethic... situates itself outside the 'mainstream' sociality, but equates women with that mainstream. Women are treated as either alien Other or (in online contexts) are assumed to be male and thus made invisible... they become carriers of sociality that is seen in a contrast to the 'technical' realm ascribed to men. Additionally F/LOSS women receive a high level of attention due to their gender which decreases their feeling of acceptance as community members.

It also observed that removing discouragement of women's participation was difficult due to technologist culture in general and Open Source culture in particular:

> Because [any social] 'conditioning' is considered more or less arbitrary, in [participants'] view it is supposed to be easily cast aside by individuals choosing to ignore it. F/LOSS also has a deeply voluntarist ethos which values notions of individual autonomy and volition. As a result *participants largely do not believe that gender has anything to do with their own individual actions*. [author's italics]

In general, the debate inside the Open Source community about whether its members are affected by undesirable social conditioning and whether constraints on their behaviour are called for or useful is vigorous, and has resulted in, for example, codes of conduct[4] and rejections of codes and their use. This article, however, focuses on a movement which largely pre-dates that discussion: the creation of separate spaces for women involved in Open Source (hereafter 'WIOS': Women in Open Source).

WIOS groups currently have two models:

- a group for WIOS which is unaffiliated with a particular project or community (LinuxChix being the major example)

- groups for WIOS within particular development communities

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1 This is the camera-ready copy of a paper that was in the OSDC 2008 proceedings. Citation:
   Mary Gardiner (2008) Gender 2.0: the state of the Women in Open Source community in *Proceedings of the Open Source Developers Conference* (OSDC 2008), December, Sydney Australia.

2 http://freshmeat.net/articles/view/145/

3 http://flosspols.org/deliverables/FLOSSPOLS-D16-Gender_Integrated_Report_of_Findings.pdf

4 For example, the Ubuntu Code of Conduct, to which participants are required to agree (http://www.ubuntu.com/community/conduct) and the voluntary GNOME code of conduct (http://live.gnome.org/CodeOfConduct)

At the present time, there are no groups this author knows of organised on the following lines, although there is no in principle reason why there could not be:

- groups representing WIOS developers broadly, across a range of projects
- women's user groups outside the Linux space dominated by LinuxChix
- groups acting as funding sources for WIOS projects

Successful groups

LinuxChix

LinuxChix[5] was founded in 1999 by Deb Richardson, and did and does specifically aim to be a contrast to the perceived "locker room" atmosphere of Linux User Groups. LinuxChix has many active email lists. Much, although not all, of the technical discussions are user-group-like, that is, they are about using Open Source software (almost always on Linux), as opposed to developing it.

LinuxChix also hosts open topic email lists. One list (*grrls-only*, created in 2002) is restricted to female subscribers.

LinuxChix has upwards of 1000 members, and several regional chapters comprising additional members who meet locally.

KDE Women

KDE Women[6] was founded in 2001 and is run on a mailing list and on IRC. They maintain lists of projects for women interested in developing KDE applications, and have developed material designed as introductions to KDE development.

Debian Women

Debian Women[7] was founded by Erinn Clark in 2004. The original request[8] for a project mailing list was for a way to promote a larger female Debian userbase, but the group has focused on increasing the number of women working on the Debian project itself, specifically women becoming Debian Developers. Debian Women has been the model for similar groups promoting women developers in other projects.

Ubuntu Women

Ubuntu Women[9] was founded in early 2006. They observe that women's participation in Ubuntu is around 2% of community members. Ubuntu Women has well-codified aims which include, for example, having Ubuntu project governing bodies ultimately consist of 50% women members. Their major ongoing project is a mentoring scheme for women in Ubuntu.

Fedora Women

Fedora Women[10] is a moderately active group for women in the Fedora community, both users and developers. Their activity is mostly on their mailing list and IRC.

PHP Women

PHP Women[11] is a user group for women developers who work in PHP. It was started in October 2006. PHP

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5 http://www.linuxchix.org/
6 http://women.kde.org/
7 http://women.debian.org/
8 http://bugs.debian.org/252171
9 http://www.ubuntu-women.org/
10 http://fedoraproject.org/wiki/Women
11 http://www.phpwomen.org/

Women primarily meets at PHP focussed conferences and holds stands to promote the group and its cause. The PHP Women group also has an active web forum and IRC channel and develops PHP tutorials and programming material for their members and the general public.

DrupalChix

DrupalChix[12] arose out of a meeting of the so-called "7% club" (at the time, 7% of Drupal developers were female) at DrupalCon Barcelona in September 2007. DrupalCons now regularly feature DrupalChix meetings.

Successful events and projects

LinuxChix Brazil conference

The LinuxChix Brazil conference is an ongoing yearly event, notable for being the longest running WIOS conference and the only one that is not hosted by a parent conference. Attendance is about half female and half male. The fifth conference was held in September 2007.

LinuxChix miniconf at linux.conf.au

The LinuxChix miniconf at linux.conf.au[13] has run for two consecutive years, in 2007 and 2008. It is part of linux.conf.au and open to all attendees, but limited to women presenters. In 2007, women comprised approximately 10% of conference registrations overall, a huge increase over previous years.

Women in Open Source Event at the Southern California Linux Expo

The Women in Open Source event at the Southern California Linux Expo has run for two consecutive years, in 2007 and 2008.[14] Very unusually for a WIOS group or event, the Women in Open Source Event was organised by a man, Gareth J. Greenaway, and it has had male as well as female speakers.

GNOME Women's Summer Outreach Program

The GNOME Women's Summer Outreach Program[15] was a GNOME community project in 2006, a counterpart to the Google Summer of Code project, as GNOME had no Summer of Code applications from women. Three Summer of Code-style projects were announced, and over 100 hundred women applied. Six projects were eventually awarded, three funded by GNOME and three by Google.

Failure of WIOS groups

It is unclear whether WIOS groups are any more prone to failure than other Open Source community projects or other volunteer projects in general.
Failure tends to stem from two factors:
1. a lack of cohesive group focus beyond discussing the proposition "that women are underrepresented in Open Source"
2. very limited supply of potential members

Building a successful WIOS group requires:
1. a set of goals or common interests for the group to coalesce around
2. a large pool of potential members

Generally speaking, the primary topic of discussion in a WIOS group should be about

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12 http://groups.drupal.org/drupalchix
13 http://conf.au.linuxchix.org/
14 2007:
http://www.socallinuxexpo.org/scale5x/conference+info/social_events/Women_in_Open_Source_Mini_Conference/
2008: http://www.socallinuxexpo.org/scale6x/conference-info/women-in-open-source/
15 http://www.gnome.org/projects/outreach/women/

Failed groups

This section lists groups for WIOS groups that are either inactive, or which have been closed. Very few WIOS groups have had an announced project close, however, this is also typical of Open Source projects in general.

- BSDChix[16]. BSDChix was founded in 2002 by Marcia Barrett Nice as a sister group to LinuxChix, and was an email list. The vast bulk of traffic occurred in 2002 and 2003.
- GNOME Women[17]. GNOME Women was announced by Hanna Wallace in June 2005.[18] Between June 2005 and January 2008 the email list had 151 messages in total, with the bulk of discussion occuring before the end of 2006 and the last substantive mails in July 2007.
- Apache Women[19]. Apache Women was an email list, women@apache.org, and was founded in August 2005 by Jean T. Anderson and Danese Cooper. It has had several hundred emails, but most were before the end of 2006.
- The Open Source Initiative's women@opensource.org mailing list. This email list was created in August 2005 after Danese Cooper's Women in Open Source panel at OSCON in 2005.[20] Between November 2005 and October 2007 only 61 emails were sent to the list, with 40 of those in a single discussion thread. It was closed by Ernest Prabhakar in December 2007, citing "a lack of interest, leadership and/or a compelling charter"and merged with the new issues@opensource.org email list.

Future of WIOS cause

As observed above, the most successful WIOS groups have moved beyond a recognition of the low numbers of women in their area and the obstacles in their path and are focussed on projects other than primarily discussing the problem.

However, there is considerable scope for further activity in the WIOS movement. Future directions could include:

- interaction with and making common cause with other under-represented demographics and groups within Open Source, in particular non-Western communities and non-Western women

- increased presence in non-English speaking development communities

- interaction with other women's groups in related spheres, for example, adult education, children's education, political activism

- increased interaction with each other, especially between other groups and the LinuxChix group, which is by far the largest. Possible collaborations might include offering joint courses

- groups focussed on cross-project communication among women of the same role, eg women coders, women documenters, women translators, women artists

- umbrella organisations for WIOS, possibly with sponsorship or donated funding that can be allocated to other groups for activities.

There is also considerable scope for more interaction between the WIOS groups and the wider open source development and user community, including such interactions as members of a WIOS group working on a project together for the larger community.

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16 http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/BSDChix/

17 http://live.gnome.org/GnomeWomen

18 http://gnomedesktop.org/node/2284

19 http://wiki.apache.org/Women/

20 http://danesecooper.blogs.com/divablog/2005/08/catchuposcon_li.html