When you think of the prominent pioneers of Information Technology, names of men like Bill Gates, Steve Case, and Steve Jobs pop to mind. But ask women around the globe that question, and chances are that they'll give you a different answer: Joan Korenman.

Ask Dianne Lynch, author of the "Wired Women" column for ABCNEWS.com. Her work puts her in touch with the heaviest hitters in the IT community. She believes Korenman, a tenured professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, is one of the most influential women on the web today. "When I first started to write my column years ago, I set out to establish some networks," Lynch says. "One name came up repeatedly in my research. People said, 'Have you seen Joan Korenman's work? Have you been to Maryland?'

UMBC’s Catonsville campus is the home to Korenman’s brainchild: the Center for Women and Information Technology. Korenman conceived the Center five years ago when she saw a disturbing trend in the tech industry. “A few years ago, when you typed the word ‘women’ into the three largest search engines, eight of the top ten most relevant hits were porno sites,” Korenman says. "It was clear to me that IT was going to be tremendously important to all of us, but that women were very underrepresented as developers of technology," Korenman says. “It’s one thing to use a search engine or to use e-mail—those are all terrific—but they don’t involve the same degree of influence or power that creating the search engine or administering the network does. Too few women are in a position to influence the directions that IT takes.”

She worried that a glass ceiling was being built within the Internet, and saw only one remedy: education. After all, it had worked before. Says Korenman: “There was a time when women were not encouraged to study law or medicine. Cultural expectations shift.”

Korenman understands cultural shifts well. She first came to UMBC in 1969 from Harvard, the ink not yet dry on her doctoral thesis in American literature.

It was an exciting time to be a young professor. War and social upheaval were reshaping the academic canon, and Korenman was at the forefront of a nascent idea: Women’s Studies. She began teaching literature written by women whom she had never encountered in her own coursework. In 1982, Korenman was named director of the school’s newly created Women’s Studies department.

She soon cultivated a broad network of scholarly connections. In 1990, one of those connections inadvertently changed her life. Korenman frequently traded letters with a professor in Minnesota, and that colleague suggested they use a new innovation called e-mail. Korenman logged on for the first time, and her world changed. “It’s hard for me to recreate that feeling now,” she says. “I found it more compelling than almost anything else I had done since I was a kid.”

Korenman felt liberated. She would log on at 2 a.m. with a question about technology, and someone across the globe would answer. She realized the awesome potential this could have on academic studies. After teaching a full load of classes, Korenman would work late into the evening, teaching herself the basics of web design. She developed the WMST-L listserv, an international e-mail forum for discussion of women’s issues. Her list grew to over 4,000
Korenman knew she needed to mend this leaky pipeline. Otherwise, she feared women could become the “new illiterates” of a tech-driven society. She launched a Women’s Studies website that culled legitimate resources from the chaff, and represented the diverse voices of women more accurately. To give a physical presence to her online revolution, in 1998 Korenman stepped down from Women’s Studies, brought the lessons learned from its website, and started the Center for Women and Information Technology (CWIT).

While most in the industry nursed a hangover from the crash of the ’90s tech party, Korenman soberly and steadily worked to bring valuable content and clarity to the often chaotic online community. “There are so many people who are stars, who are flashy,” ABCNEWS.com’s Lynch says. “And there are those people who carry the load and just keep at it.”

Korenman is one of those persistent people. In 2001, the nonprofit group San Francisco Women of the Web recognized Korenman’s achievements by naming her one of their Top 25 Women of the Year. Getting recognition from the Silicon Valley-area’s cognoscenti further boosted Korenman’s stature.

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