

Hacking exclusion : African feminists engagements and disruption of the internet

By Jennifer Radloff

*“The internet is a **transformative** public and political space. It facilitates new forms of citizenship that enable individuals to claim, construct, and express our selves, genders, sexualities. This includes connecting across territories, demanding accountability and transparency, and significant opportunities for feminist movement-building.”¹*

Introduction

An important connection between women's rights activism and building movements of solidarity and resistance, is communication. Communication is the support, the glue, the channel, the fabric which allows our networks to sustain and grow. We construct ourselves, communities and intimate relationships through connecting be it speaking, telling stories, touch, writing or signing. We build knowledge from the information, experiences and struggles that we communicate to each other. When we dialogue, debate and meet in spaces of witnessing, we grow our resistances and strategies more strongly. The internet is a fundamental and potentially transformative public space which can enable and facilitate communication at speed, across borders and through time and space. It is a tool that is political, complicated, gendered, biased and increasingly surveilled and policed. It is a stage for violences that are familiar to feminists living and resisting in spaces outside of the internet. The internet is a space too for incredible creativity and connection and according to the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) *“is an extension, reflection and continuum of our movements and resistance in other spaces..”²*

“Since their inception, women’s movements have responded to the patriarchal privileging of male knowledge by developing a rich array of alternative communication strategies. From women’s collectives, reading, writing and storytelling circles, feminist presses, radio stations and films, women speak out, write, and publish, creating new discourses and challenging patriarchal and imperialist legacies that continue to marginalise, erase, and reduce women’s contributions to the world, while reinscribing male supremacy by default.“ (Radloff, 2013) ³

The landscape of exclusion

1 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

2 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet> Principle 2

3 Editorial: Feminist engagements with 21st-century communications technology, Jennifer Radloff. Feminist Africa Issue 18. 2013. e-spaces: e-politics. http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/editorial-feminist_engagements_with_21st-century_communications_technol.pdf Page3.

The 2013 Broadband Commission report⁴ notes that there are 200 million fewer women than men who are online, while two-thirds of the world's population remains without access to the internet. Although these numbers seem staggering, and if one notes that in Africa, the gender digital divide is even wider, we can understand why the incorporation of the internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into our lives as women living and working in Africa has not been uncontested nor easy. ICTs tools, spaces and platforms were and still are seen as sites of privilege and had the potential to further rupture women's movements already faced with a range of differences. In the 1990's African feminists debated new communication technologies as potentially divisive to the movements, given unequal access and all the "offline" social exclusions which were replicated "online". These conflicts were drawn up along lines of class, race, location and privilege. They were complicated and important debates as the non-homogeneity of women's movements means that women have different lived realities and contexts, so there is no one response.

However, there have been huge shifts in recent years with ICTs and internet use being integrated into African women's advocacy and mobilising. Feminist communication rights activists have consistently worked to upfront how ICT and the internet provide and create critical spaces for us to talk, listen, dialogue and resist. Much of the work of feminist communication rights activists is in building cross-movement dialogue to visibilise the importance of accessing and influencing internet governance spaces to infuse a feminist perspective as the tools and spaces we are now inhabiting are critical to our activism.

An important current discourse around gender and the internet focuses on the integration of gender lacking in policies that govern the internet, violations that take place as a result, and the need for increased women's participation in decision-making forums.⁵ The work now is to re-frame this conversation, and to work towards an internet that feminists want, that reflect, represent and reposition women's lives on their terms and in their voices. Debates and tactics around how ICTs can and do support feminist activism in Africa and globally are now in the realm of claiming and using the internet as well as working to infuse governance and where possible corporate spaces with a feminist lens.

Resistances and creative engagements

Central to a feminist approach to ICTs is *"to connect questions of gender and communication with the various ways in which race, class, culture, sexual orientation, age, history, colonialism, and the social division of labour intersect and shape women's communication experiences and identities."*⁶

4 <http://www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/bb-annualreport2013.pdf> (p 52) The State of Broadband 2013: Universalizing Broadband. A report by the Broadband Commission. ITU and UNESCO

5 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

6 <http://docs.bridge.ids.ac.uk/vfile/upload/1/document/0803/ID2333a.pdf> (pg27)

Creative and strategic examples of how ICTs have been used by feminists on the continent proliferate from the mid-1990's. In 1995 at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, a women-led initiative providing internet access, electronic communications and information services and support to over 30,000 women, centralised the potential of ICTs in amplifying women's rights struggles and began a movement which works at visibilising the convergence between ICT issues and women's rights agendas. Led by 30 women from 25 countries, this event modelled to other women that [the then] new technology was appropriate for and could be maintained by women.⁷ Significantly this event also catalysed advocacy around Section J on women and media of the Beijing Platform for Action. It began the recognition of the critical role that the media and ICTs play in both advancing and stifling women's rights.

The formation of Women'sNet in 1998 saw communication technologies bridging spaces between NGO's and women newly elected to South African's first democratic parliament. *"It was a powerful, interactive and valuable opportunity for women and gender activists at that time in our herstory as South Africans, as activists and as women aware of the need to harness ICTs."*⁸

In 2002 the African Gender Institute launched Feminist Africa⁹ a continental gender studies journal produced by the community of African feminist scholars. Feminist Africa is important in that it deliberately challenges the huge amount of intellectual writings produced in the North about African women's lived realities whilst acknowledging that Africa's social and cultural processes are inextricably linked to global processes. And it uses the internet to add to and transform existing narratives on African women.

African women and feminist organisations appropriation and use of ICTs and the internet has increased exponentially since the early 2000's. Dorcas Muthoni, founder of AfChix, a mentorship and capacity building initiative for women in computing across Africa started in 2004, was inducted into the Internet Hall of Fame in 2014.¹⁰ Anriette Esterhysen¹¹ was inducted in 2013 because of her transformative work in information and communication work in Africa in development and human rights since 1987. Ory Okolloh, a Kenyan activist, lawyer, and blogger co-founded Ushahidi¹² the Swahili word for Witness, a website that collects and records eyewitness reports of violence using text messages and Google maps which is now a ubiquitous platform for mapping crises interventions and many other human rights violations. AkiraChix¹³ based in Kenya aims to inspire and develop a successful force of women in technology who will change Africa's future. It is important that

7 <http://docs.bridge.ids.ac.uk/vfile/upload/1/document/0803/ID2333a.pdf>

8 <http://www.womensnet.org.za/history.html>

9 <http://agi.ac.za/journals>

10 <http://internethalloffame.org/inductees/dorcas-muthoni>

11 <http://internethalloffame.org/inductees/anriette-esterhysen>

12 <http://www.ushahidi.com/>

13 <http://akirachix.com/>

these names are inscribed in internet history-making as women role models from Africa involved in technology innovation are largely ignored.

In 2014, Kenyan women took to the streets to march against street harassment and violent attacks on women for wearing miniskirts and other supposedly inappropriate articles of clothing—they used the hashtag #MyDressMyChoice on Twitter. Soon, the hashtag had generated a global outcry, with thousands of tweets from around the world of women and men standing in solidarity with Kenyan women in the struggle against violence. Similar actions happened in South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe where women, many of whom are not linked to activist organisations, joined in solidarity and used ICTs and the internet to amplify demands.

African feminists began challenging European and African patriarchal ideals of Black bodies and sexuality in response to the biased and dominant images of African women found online and to reverse the racist standards of beauty that dominate much media. Nana Dakora and Malaka started Adventures from the bedrooms of African Women because “*We think there is a serious lack of relevant and useful information about the sexuality of African women. This blog is a space for African women to share tips, experiences and more...*”

“¹⁴Queer Africans, sexual rights activists and LGBTI organisations are using the internet as an organising and meeting space as many contexts and offline spaces are hostile, homophobic and dangerous.

“*The internet creates an alternate reality for many gender non-conforming women and men—a place with a degree of freedom of expression and existence that is either lacking or limited in their realities and real lives.*”¹⁵

Engaging the internet for meaningful use of the transformative potentials to strengthen and facilitate activist agendas:

“*If the real world is sexist, it is very likely that most of the technology that develops will have the virus of sexism in its core as well. That core will seamlessly define rules and space of the virtual world.*”¹⁶

As feminists we see our lives as political. We interrogate patriarchal privilege, exclusion and violence as these are so often the realities that we inhabit. As a relatively new frontier, the internet can strengthen and facilitate feminist activism and women’s organising to support positive change. However, this will not be meaningful nor sustainable for women as both greater access to the internet and greater control over the production and governance of technologies is needed to be able to use and shape the various platforms to respond to our priorities and realities. The internet is being used to disrupt and creatively transform inequitable systems that reinforce the many patriarchal violences against women.

14 <http://adventuresfrom.com/>

15 <http://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/why-internet-rights-matter-africans>

16 <http://oneworldplatform.net/en/why-feminism-matters-to-internet/>

Systemic oppression of women exists offline as it does online, it manifests in the digital bodies we create as well as in the spaces we occupy in-between. Technology has “*encrypted the current paradigm of power relations.*”¹⁷ To continue to claim and to transform the internet, African feminists need to organise locally and globally, across movements and differences and to continually interrogate the dominance of northern privilege when both claiming the internet as a free and open resource and in confronting the violences and insecurities that are the current reality.

Access which is meaningful, affordable, unfettered and which encompasses not only access to the infrastructure but also to the governance of the internet is still a site of struggle on the continent. Statistics speak to the inequities of access between North and South and between women and men. Principle 1 of the feminist principles states: “*A feminist internet starts with and works towards empowering more women and queer persons – in all our diversities – to dismantle patriarchy. This includes universal, affordable, unfettered, unconditional and equal **access** to the internet.*”¹⁸

Working in governance spaces such as the multi-stakeholder Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the recently developed African Declaration on internet rights and freedoms¹⁹ is vital for feminists. What is equally important is to infuse existing agendas, protocols, platforms and development Agenda's which speak to Africa's future, governance and development with the need to include internet rights and within this women's rights as central to any meaningful growth and change.

Online violences against women.

4. *Violence online and tech-related violence are part of the continuum of gender-based violence. The misogynistic attacks, threats, intimidation, and policing experienced by women and queers LGBTQI people is real, harmful, and alarming. It is our collective responsibility as different internet stakeholders to prevent, respond to, and resist this violence.*²⁰

Technology-related violence against women is as ubiquitous as offline violence and yet it is not seen as “real harm” and legislation to combat this is virtually non-existent. As Francoise Mkuku says: “*Technology related VAW, or eVAW, in the Democratic Republic of Congo is widespread but not acknowledged because there is a lack of understanding of what it is and how it works.*”²¹

Preventing technology-related VAW is an important component in ending violence against women and is vital in contributing to creating a safe and secure environment for women and girls in all spheres of life. Online violence

17 <http://oneworldplatform.net/en/why-feminism-matters-to-internet/>

18 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

19 <http://africaninternetrightrights.org/declaration-container/declaration/>

20 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

21 <http://www.apc.org/en/node/15007/>

and harassment of women is one of the biggest reasons why women leave online spaces or choose to use pseudonyms as a way of remaining anonymous. Interestingly, anonymity is a hugely contested terrain with conservative governments using the fears of terrorism and child pornography to support legislation which would outlaw anonymity – one action which protects women online. *“It is our inalienable right to choose, express, and experiment with our diverse sexualities on the internet. Anonymity enables this.”*²²

Transpeople, minorities, those who identify as lesbian, gay or gender-diffuse, who work in sexual and reproductive rights and justice, are particularly under attack. If we are to claim the internet as a public space, this violence is a serious virus, violating and affecting women's right to privacy, freedom of expression and association. The culpability of internet companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube in not addressing these violences played out on their platforms in a meaningful way, reinforces a patriarchal response to the experiences of women.

There is no separation between online and offline violence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, two teens' private photos, taken by a boyfriend, were posted to Facebook without their consent²³. The offline consequences were enormous as they were for a women human rights defender in Pakistan attacked in a blog post by people calling for her death. She and her husband were targeted in a drive-by shooting.

In the many responses and strategies to combat technology-related violence against women, feminists work at strengthening the capacity of women's rights activists and organisations to use technology tools in their work to end violence against women and to respond to the growing incidence of technology-related violence against women. One campaign which started in 2006 is Take Back The Tech! This global, collaborative campaign is a call to everyone, especially women and girls, to take control of technology to end violence against women. Through local, national and global campaigns, the actions highlight the problem of tech-related violence against women. The campaigns aggregate responses and experiences which result in research and solutions from different parts of the world which feeds into policy and advocacy responses.

The United Nations Campaign UNiTE to End Violence against Women has the 25th of each month as 'Orange Day', a day to raise awareness and take action against violence against women and girls. And to imagine a future free from violence against women and girls. 25 May each year focuses on building and experimenting with technology solutions to prevent violence against women and girls, assist survivors and the agencies that work to support them.

The impacts of these violences are profound in making the internet unsafe. As one African feminist activist said in talking about her use of the internet as

22 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

23 http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/case_studies_rdc2_2.pdf

alternative space for expression *“in some cases [the internet is] an escape for many African women and men, who live in spaces that do not tolerate or allow their different ways of expressing themselves and their sexuality. But this escape is the privilege of a few African women and men.”*²⁴

Securing the digital environment

*“10. Surveillance by default is the tool of patriarchy to control and restrict rights both online and offline. The right to **privacy** and to exercise full control over our own data is a critical principle for a safer, open internet for all. Equal attention needs to be paid to surveillance practices by individuals against each other, as well as the private sector and non-state actors, in addition to the state.”*²⁵

Control of women's bodies and lives, expression as well as dissent is exerted in various ways by patriarchy. In both the offline and online world, surveillance is the norm. Women's right to privacy is critical for the realisation of a full personal and political life. Digital security has become synonymous with the use of digital technology and central to any activism which includes the use of digital tools. This is not only relevant in online spaces but for the safe control of the tools that we use, such as computers, mobile phones and tablets.

Feminists face and experience digital threats in different ways. The more we gain traction, power and space on the internet, the greater the threats become.

*jac smk @jhybe RT @manzibarr Things feminists didnt foresee “While we were gaining access some others were gaining access to us”
#imagineafeministinternet*²⁶

Threats are dependent on where women are located, what bodies they inhabit and what activism they are engaged in. Black African women are faced with sexualised and raced abuse which is experienced differently to white women based in both Northern and Southern spaces. Although the internet is borderless, the abuses still mirror the lines of privilege and prejudice expressed in the world. Central to securing online spaces is for feminists to understand the threats faced and how to counter these threats. Key to our activism in a hostile environment is to examine the nature of digital threats, what the possible consequences are and know the strategies, tools and technical responses that can keep our activism safer.

“If you say you are a women's human rights defender who is conscious about secure online communications, then you must realise that it is not only you protecting yourself on the internet but also others who you must not put at

24 <http://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/why-internet-rights-matter-africans>

25 <http://www.genderit.org/articles/feminist-principles-internet>

26 <http://www.genderit.org/es/node/4037>

risk.” (Anonymous)²⁷

Conclusion

In order to realise the ideal of all people having easy and affordable access to a free and open internet without misogyny and violence means feminists “taking back the tech”. It means inhabiting governance spaces, exchanging skills and knowledge and building cross-movement partnerships in order to explore the intersections and strategic opportunities. It means developing a feminist approach to ICTs and the internet. It also means continually interrogating privilege within African feminist movements as access for some can mean exclusion for others.

It means challenging discourses that see African women as recipients of technology aid and only in need of mobile phones for their 'development' rather than seeing the agency being taken by African women technologists who are hacking, building, coding and co-creating systems which work for local realities.

“Women (need to) see themselves as not just using technology but as stakeholders in the health and regulation and freedoms of the internet.”²⁸

27 <http://www.genderit.org/node/3460>

28 <http://www.genderit.org/node/3460>

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