

In Conversation: Jennifer Radloff and *Jan Moolman* on technology-related violence against women

Jan Moolman is a feminist editor, writer, trainer and activist with extensive experience in the South and southern African women's rights sector. Her entry point into women's rights has been through media – she is a former editor of *Agenda*, South Africa's longest-surviving feminist journal; newspaper columnist; and contributor to a number of publications dealing with women's rights issues. Previously, Jan guest edited an *Agenda* journal edition on technology with a team from Women'sNet, where she worked as the Media and Information Manager. Women'sNet is a southern African organisation that promotes the strategic use of ICTs amongst women, girls and marginalised groups for social action. Through her work at the Southern African NGO Network (SANGONeT), Jan conducted training and capacity building for South African NGOs in the use of social media to deepen and support their work and managed an information portal. Jan works in the Women's Networking and Support Programme as the Women's Rights Project Coordinator where her work focuses on the intersection of violence against women and technology. Jan is also a digital storytelling trainer and is currently working towards a Masters in Media Studies.

JR: Tell me a bit about why the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) started its work with technology-related violence against women (VAW).

JM: APC's work with technology-related VAW started in 2005 before I had joined APC. APC's interest in this work was sparked when we began to hear stories from our women members and partners about misogynistic and violent, usually sexually violent, threats that were happening to them. APC has a global membership, mostly based in the global South and the stories that were being reported were coming from various regions. The reports included threatening SMSs from blocked and unidentifiable numbers, women being tracked and the harassers seeming to know where they are and what they are doing. So this work started with stories, as most things happen,

and we began to investigate more and uncover ways in which violence was manifesting through technology platforms and tools.

As access to broadband increased and the cost of access decreased and more women were getting online, the more stories we heard and the stories began to have more detail and texture to them. A large number of the cases related to blackmail and tracking, mostly via mobile platforms but increasingly misogynistic and violent threats were being made towards women bloggers, usually anonymously. APC started putting together the experiences of women and the different technologies being used. It was not only threats made via technology but also how men were controlling and abusing women through women owning for example mobile phones. For example, in Uganda in December 2008, there were two reports of men who murdered their wives after accusing the women of receiving love SMSs. APC began to document these stories and to start theorising around this in order to better understand these trends. Two issue papers were written through this theorising and are very useful pieces of work.

Initially what we found both interesting and disturbing was (and still is!) the paternalistic development theory related to ICTs for development that said if you provide women with access to technology “they” are automatically empowered. Apart from this being a gender-blind approach, there was no connection or acknowledgement to the threats to women’s online safety and security and the growth in technology-related VAW. We also began to hear stories of women being abused because they had access to or ownership of technology. As related in the Uganda story, the mere fact that women had a cell phone could put her at risk. This flew in the face of the theory that ownership of technology represents power and access to a whole range of information she never had before. We began to trouble existing theories around technology as *only* empowering for women. Whilst our work absolutely acknowledges that access to technology is critical for engaged citizenship, access to communication, information and a range of rights for women and men, women were at particular risk and exposed to a range of forms of violence. The internet and technology clearly creates so many opportunities for women and women’s rights and also presents a particular kind of experience for women using technology. People started using language about technology like it is “two sides of the same coin” or technology-related VAW being “the dark side of the internet.” We saw this as problematic as some women were

withdrawing from the potentials of technology and the consequence of that is to withdraw from immense opportunities that the internet and mobile phones have for advancing women rights. When we attended the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women earlier this year, we prepared a statement which is useful to reference here:

These technology related forms of violence against women cause psychological and emotional harm, reinforce prejudice, damage reputation, cause economic loss and pose barriers to participation in public life. Reporting and responses of these violations are generally limited and the harm and abuse are poorly understood. (Association for Progressive Communications, 2013)

JR: So what were some of the issues you've uncovered as you began to explore technology-related VAW?

JM: We began to acknowledge that the internet has some unique characteristics that add to this complexity in a context of women's rights and access. Using language of the "dark side and the good side" is simplistic and unsophisticated. It is complicated. We talk about VAW in a context of technology and these conversations happen in a world where VAW is a huge problem and one of the biggest challenges and concerns around the world. We cannot separate VAW and technology as VAW happens in context of power, is often normalised and happens with impunity. These three things continue online. So we realised that it is not useful to have online and offline comparison as it could have consequence of relegating technology-related VAW as "not so important." The approach and idea that VAW happening online is "not that serious" is one of the reasons why technology-related VAW is so rampant. It is seen as not important or not as serious as "offline" VAW. We know that the characteristics of the harm caused by these online violations are serious and valid and we should not make comparisons as we then take seriousness out of it. The violence, harm and the consequences for women is similar and as damaging and dangerous. But the characteristics of the internet add layers of complexity to the debates. First is the notion of private and public which is at the very core of feminist struggles in Africa and everywhere. What constitutes private and public? On the one hand we are in an era where so much is public. We see women (and men) "performing" on Facebook for example in a public way often representing and reflecting what we perform in private. So for example,

taking the idea of “selfies,” meaning a preoccupation of taking and publishing pictures of ourselves. There is much critique around why this is (or is not) a problem. Young people are not using the internet necessarily for activism but taking and publishing photos of themselves thus creating a sense of individualism. So the response is that what the internet does in terms of young people is problematic. Young people are saying “Look at how amazing I am” and representing how they want to be seen.

But this is not the only thing that is happening. Taking selfies is not only narcissism but can be a powerful act of resistance. For example, someone who I know, a black African feminist, took a “selfie” of herself naked using her body to cover parts of herself that she did not want to show. The act of taking the photo and sharing was an act of absolute resistance on a continent where women are repeatedly told that we should be ashamed of our bodies. Cover yourself if you are a woman and this is how you should be. The act of the “selfie” becomes an act of resistance. This is the nuance that the internet enables and why the internet should be cared for and it is why we should protect it and our right to perform, with caution as with any new thing.

Again in Africa young girls are taking photos of themselves, with their breasts exposed, posing seductively and sending to friends. A positive performance of sexuality of young people. The internet has given us the power and possibility to represent ourselves. This is driven from an idea of redistributing power from concentrated points to a multiplicity of points. This becomes more powerful when we recognise where the internet came from and why it happened in the first place. Women are using the internet from multiple places, using a range of technologies and re-representing themselves in ways that were unimagined before. Women are so used to images given to us by people who have power and now many women have access to technology to represent themselves that are different from the mainstream. The internet enables young people to play with their sexual identities often in ways which they cannot do or be offline. It is often too dangerous or too difficult. We can represent ourselves.

My colleague jac SM Kee speaks of the body being material, discursive and digitised. She speaks of the body that goes beyond the physical and how representations of ourselves are already digitised e.g. biometric cards. Digitisation of the body makes the body more real. When we talk of harm via the internet, we hear people say “she wasn’t really hurt,” even if the abusers

say they will rape her, people interpret this as “she wasn’t really raped.” If we understand that our digitised body is still part of us, then we can begin to understand the type of harm that is caused.

JR: How has APC responded to all these cases, debates and dialogues around this issue?

JM: Well, one of our first responses was to create a global campaign and platform called Take Back the Tech. We started this in 2006 wanting to create a space where women, organisations and networks could write, report, share, create and engage across countries and regions, on their experiences of VAW and ICTs. So we chose the dates of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence and created daily actions where people could engage, contribute and at the same time learn how to use ICTs. So for example, one action was for people to draw, paint or photograph how they would use technology to combat VAW and then upload that image or image and text to the platform. Some beautiful images and dreams were uploaded. Another was to create radio spots on VAW and ICTs to play on community radio stations to raise awareness of the issues. The campaign aggregates activities of organisations in many languages so there is a central space to share and learn. But we also wanted this to be a way of women and girls to use ICTs to fight and resist online VAW. The campaign has been hugely successful and now includes a map where incidents of online VAW can be reported.

From 2009 to 2011, we worked with partners from eight countries in a project which researched how technology is being used to perpetuate violence against women. We learnt so much from this and were able to develop policy advocacy strategies, award small grants to enable local innovation around the issues, built the capacity of women’s groups to both combat online VAW and use technology strategically in their activism. This project led to further funding for our End Violence: Women’s rights and safety online where we are (among other activities), gathering further evidence from seven countries, building women’s capacity to be safe online and build the leadership and institutional capacity of women to influence the telecommunications industry.

JR: Why should feminists be concerned about technology-related VAW? How does it impact our rights, freedoms and activism?

JM: Our starting point in relation to our work as feminists, including our work in technology-related VAW, is that ICTs are not gender neutral but are produced, used and distributed in a context of unequal power relations. We cannot get away

from the deep gender divide of who has and who does not have access to ICTs. For marginalised groups who have access, it gives us the possibilities to construct, deconstruct and reconfigure our own identities and the structures within which they live. By structures, I mean for example the government and media. At same time ICTs enable new forms of discrimination, violence and exclusion. Online misogyny and abusive comments is one form of technology-related VAW that has received a lot of focus and there is a publicness about it and increasingly is being confronted by different kinds of people and the responses have been interesting. It show us the slipperiness of it. For example, one of the things the internet allows us to do is to be anonymous. It is a powerful notion, especially for people who are at risk. It gives us safety in some way. It is also critically important as it allows women in abusive relationships to get help anonymously and to search for information without revealing their identity. In online chatrooms and special focus groups, women can ask a question they would never ordinarily ask. This inserts a sense of power for people who have little power. And as feminists, we know how important this is. We see how power circulates and how anonymity is an important tactic in that regard. You can ask a question of a president for example if you are anonymous, or if you are on a forum where there is a doctor you can ask intimate questions which you may be too afraid to ask as “yourself.” This shows us why anonymity on the internet must be preserved and respected.

So as feminists, we need to acknowledge and also to explore the complexity of the internet in relation to the debates around anonymity. At the same time as it gives power to survivors, it is used by abusers. If we look at the Twitter abuse case, Anita etc. there have been calls to say we need to know the identities of these abusive people to call them to book. But if we do this to everybody else, then what happens when no one has anonymity. The power it gives to the marginal, is taken away again. So we need to be careful, as feminists engaged with the internet, what we call for. Anonymity also allows a particular kind of organising and solidarity and there is a flattening out of things. A counter argument could be the Syrian example of a white man, Tom MacMaster, pretending to be a lesbian Muslim woman, Amina Abdallah Arraf al Omari. The blog purportedly by “Amina’s” cousin claimed that Amina had been abducted on 6 June 2011 which sparked a huge outcry by activists. But it was all a hoax (Wikipedia, 2013). Our relationship to privacy and by extension our security, has been challenged by the internet.

The privacy of our data and our information that we share about ourselves online is being used by private companies to market products. We ordinarily are reasonably careful about what kind of information we share publicly when we fill in a paper form. We think about what does that giving up of responsibility and private detail mean when we tick boxes on forms. Online and in particular, with social media, we tend to agree to terms and conditions that we do not read. We usually read every word of a paper form but there is a glazing over of the consequences when we are online. It is out there but it is not out there, it is who you are.

The research and experience of the APC's Women's Rights Programme we integrate into our advocacy strategy which is crucial if we are going to see changes in policy and in law. Two forums in which we have consistently engaged in and raised issues of technology-related VAW and sexuality and the internet are the Internet Governance Forum and the UN Commission on the Status of Women. We know that advocacy around these issues are critical. One recent success of the advocacy of activists is the South African anti-harassment law which now enables people to take out restraining orders against people who harass them via electronic means (SouthAfrica.info, 2013).

Earlier this year, we presented a statement to the 57th Commission on the Status of Women and this is how we explained and described the characteristics of the risks of women's participation online which I think are important points to describe here. But again with the caveat that these points are complex and need engagement and debate by feminists to make sure that we are clear about what we are calling for in any policy changes.

Anonymity: Widespread usage of digital technology has increased the potential for an abuser to remain anonymous. An intimate partner, acquaintance, work colleague or stranger can commit abuses without physically entering public spaces.

Automation: The automation enabled by ICTs allows abusers to check their partners' mobile phones for SMSs, monitor social networking activity, check their browser history and log into their personal accounts with little effort in ways that do not require any special knowledge or skills.

Action at a distance: ICTs permit sexual harassers to send abusive messages from anywhere in the world to anywhere in the world. This makes it more difficult for a survivor to identify and take action against an abuser. An example of this are cases where abusers morph the faces of women onto pornographic

images and post them online with personal information. This violation is a result of multiple actions done at a distance without contact with the victim.

Affordability: New ICTs have also significantly reduced the difficulty and cost of production and propagation of information. In particular, Web 2.0 is a platform that supports interactive information sharing, user-generated content, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. Anyone with a mobile phone can take and upload images or videos. One-to-many and many-to-many distribution through one click in an email application, Facebook or YouTube allow the images to be replicated thousands of times at no cost.

Propagation: In cyberspace settings, abuse can happen every day, all year round. The internet “records everything and forgets nothing.” The continuous traffic of harassing text and images makes it hard if not impossible to track down and stop further circulation. Moreover, the propagation of texts and images re-victimises women. It can follow victims/survivors everywhere – at home, at work and at school, whenever their computer or mobile phone is turned on, without relief and often without recourse.

JR: Tell us about some of the cases of technology-related violence in Africa and the debates and issues framing these cases.

JM: An organisation we work with in the Democratic Republic of Congo is a group of young feminists, many of whom are journalists. They tell about how one of the first things that happens in situations of war is that communication channels are closed down. This means that organisations can’t ask for global solidarity which increases the chances of things happening with impunity. SMS services, the cheapest way for women to mobilise and reach constituencies, often in remote areas, are cut. The media programmes made in the capital of Kinshasa to raise public awareness against violence against women were cut off, not reaching women who were at risk. This strategy was used recently by the M23 rebels when they took the city of Goma. The first thing they did was to cut all radio signals emitting from the capital Kinshasa.

The experience of Women Human Rights Defenders has revealed how state and non-state actors use technology to de-legitimise and spread false rumours about women leaders. This is done through uploading images out of context of women leaders for example in a bathing costume on the beach which, given the social norms of a particular culture, would call into question the leadership of women. So questions around sexuality are still used, now as “digital strategies,” to denigrate and harass women leaders.

A particularly pernicious form of technology-related VAW are viral rape videos. There have been many cases reported in South Africa. Most recently the case of a group of men who gang-raped a mentally challenged teenager and distributed the rape via mobile phones. Given the nature of technology and what is known as a digital footprint (basically the trail one leaves when using the digital environment), once a video has been sent from one mobile phone to another or uploaded to the internet, the control of what happens to the video, who views it, sends it on, is forever lost. In rape cases there is continued trauma and secondary victimisation experienced through the first telling of the rape, reporting to the police, the judicial system etc. With rape videos which go viral, the victimisation goes on for perpetuity and is forwarded, shared and the survivor never knows if the last copy has been taken down or if it may still be stored on someone's physical digital device and appear again in the future.

The positive reasons that it is now possible for anyone to be a filmmaker or distributor, is precisely because of the opportunities that technology provides, which again upfronts the complexities, opportunities and potential dangers of technology.

Something about the ubiquity of ICTs means that as feminists they are an important site of both struggle and opportunity. That they are a reflection of the power relations and inequalities is itself reason enough for us to pay attention to the debates and decisions about privacy, security and surveillance which are going on without us and which are framed in a discourse of gender neutrality which masks women's specific experiences. However we might feel about ICTs, the fact is that they change the world and how we see ourselves in it.

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