

# Imagining a Feminist Internet

## Addressing the Militarization of ICTs

### An interview with *Nadine Moawad* by *Sophie Schellens*

Nadine Moawad is a feminist organizer based in Beirut, Lebanon. Between 2009 and 2011, she conducted research for EROTICS on internet regulation in Lebanon, and she now coordinates the global EROTICS project with the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), which explores the intersections of sexual rights and the Internet. She tweets via @nmoawad.



**“Imagine a feminist Internet that contributes to solutions for societal issues at hand, instead of creating additional problems.”**

Since its establishment in 1990, the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) has been working on empowering and supporting organizations, social movements and activists in their use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for their work on human rights, social justice and participatory political processes. An important focus of APC’s work is the intersections of ICTs with societal issues, most notably with gender and the freedom of speech. “We are working on bringing about free and open technology and an Internet that is accessible and safe, and where people can achieve positive change,” Nadine explains. “We see the Internet as a space to facilitate social change. However, with technology changing so fast, we are almost unable to keep up with its opportunities, but also, and more importantly, to keep up with the risks it poses on society, on human-rights defenders and on women specifically.”

#### *How can we connect militarization with recent developments in the ICTs, including the Internet?*

“The Internet, and many other ICTs, were originally designed for military purposes. Current technological developments aim to refine military technology, using it for remote-control weapons such as drones, for data gathering, and for surveillance and monitoring. After the mainstreaming of the Internet, it has been a continuous struggle to ensure that the Internet is used for positive, transformative change, instead of for war and violence.

“The increased monitoring and surveillance through the Internet and other ICTs, such as mobile phones and GPS

tracking, is a very worrisome development. It constitutes a violation of privacy. Many people are being monitored without ever having done anything wrong, or just because they live in a country that is experiencing political or armed conflict. The recent revelations by Edward Snowden have sounded the alarm that the Internet and ICTs are not safe, nor were they designed to be safe. They are designed to collect people’s data for surveillance and monitoring. People are often unaware of the information they are giving by using GPS tracking or online social networks, such as Facebook, Google and Twitter. Private companies control this information and give it to governments for surveillance purposes.

“Surveillance and monitoring is accompanied by the privatization of ICTs. Collecting data and personal information, either for surveillance or for commercial use, has become a profit-making model. Online social networks are engineered to collect as much data as possible. This kind of data collection is closely connected to militarization; the more you know about people, the more power you can have over them. In addition, the use of ICTs during the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa revealed the political role that online social networks can play in such developments, given the amount of data they can collect. Despite the beneficial use of social media by protesters, it raised questions such as who controls these data and which side of the conflict are the controllers on? For instance, if a certain social-media company would choose the side of an oppressive regime, it could transfer data shared on its media with the oppressive government, thus increasing the risks for activists.

“The majority of the money invested in technology investments goes to the development of war-related technology. Besides surveillance technology, much money is invested

in developing lethal technologies, with a focus on long-distance, remote-controlled weapons. Some national armies have the potential to kill people with weapons controlled from their own kitchen. In a side note, these remote-controlled weapons use the same technology that is installed in Xboxes, Wiis and other gaming computers. From a social-justice and peace-activist perspective, it is dangerous to invest in all these militarist technologies, while technology itself has so much potential for use in building peace.”

*Which gender dynamics can you identify in relation to the militarization of ICTs?*

“ICT is yet another space for patriarchy to manifest itself in. Dominance, hegemonic masculinity and misogyny are just a few patriarchal elements that characterize the current ICT field. This should come at no surprise, since men, mostly from Western societies, in general dominate the field of ICT.

“In regard to the gender component related to women, we can identify the classical challenges. First, women are not at the table when ICT decisions are being made. Second, gender is not taken up as an issue to be addressed through ICT. Third, ICT is another space that facilitates violence against women, and as a tool it creates more possibilities to attack women. Lastly, the focus lies on facilitating technology that supports war and would profit from war, harming women in particular.

“Feminism has always been about challenging hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity. Linking masculinity to militarization and violence contributes to hostile masculinities. We can see manifestations of hegemonic gender identities in the field of ICT as well: hostile masculinities but also the idea of helpless women not being allowed to participate in a public space like the Internet. The struggle to redefine concepts of masculinity and femininity is also going on in ICTs.

“The militarized use of ICTs has specifically affected women. Research on violence against women in relation to technology shows that technology has allowed for new ways to perpetuate misogyny, for example by tracking the phones of women, by spreading violent expressions against women on the Internet, or by means of personal attacks on women via online social networks. In a survey on sexual rights and the Internet, more than half of the activists questioned indicated that they had received threats regarding their online activism around sexual and reproductive health and rights, either through online bul-

lying or attacks by fake accounts, or by having their personal and private information published online.”

*What are the effects of the militarization of ICTs on civil society, specifically on the women’s movement and the peace movement?*

“ACP will launch a survey on human-rights violations through technology soon. However, from the limited data that is currently available and from an analysis of women human-rights defenders (WHRD), we have learned that women and peace activists experience a tougher environment in which to work, due to technology developments. It has become more difficult to engage in activism against local and international militarist processes, since ICT, as a tool, is dominated by the national military, and by even militias.

“ICTs can be used both as a tool and as a space for activism. As a tool, it presents many benefits for women peace activists, but we have to make sure it is safe to use. Therefore, we have to promote safe browsing, via TOR systems, using Internet browsers that are not collecting information, and by diverting people away from online data-gathering social networks.

“There is a saying that illustrates the current problem: ‘We do not have to implant chips in people; they are already carrying the chips around with them.’ Women need to be aware of this. For example, mobile-phone devices can be tracked, used by hackers, and logged into by third parties. Many women and peace activists know about these risks, but do not pay attention to them because they disregard their own personal safety. This attitude is precisely the enemy. The risks are not only personal: they also cover all the networks that you work with. People you work with will also be tracked via your devices.

“To tackle this, we need to promote the use of safety software. The women’s movement has been slow in picking up the struggle for free, safe and open-source technology. The emphasis lay on equipping women with the capacity to use Microsoft applications or computers in general, but not on equipping them with the tools they need for their own safety. Women are always at risk, especially women peace activists. They already face patriarchy with physical guns but often lack the capacity to see the personal and community patriarchal threats coming from ICTs. It is therefore a priority to bring technology and the women’s movement together. There is still a lot to be done in addressing this issue.”



### *What are the risks and opportunities for using ICTs as a tool to address militarism?*

“ICT has always brought us the promise of being an alternative media, of going against mainstream ideas and stories. In the beginning it was a space for experimenting, a space to rethink social dynamics and gender roles. There has been also a push for feminists to use it. Three years ago, I would have said that ICTs and the Internet form an opportunity for social transformation. But now, along with many other activists, I have become more critical about using ICT for social change.

“Technology for violence mapping, naming and shaming, awareness raising and hashtag activism has been spread all over the civil-society field. Now is the moment to rethink our dependency on this kind of online activism. We should critically assess whether this kind of activism leads away from more crucial, grassroots activist activities. We can also question whether online activism has influenced women’s lives. And finally, we must recognize that there are still issues in terms of accessing this kind of activism, especially in the global south.

“There is always the promise of new opportunities through ICTs. To make this promise come true, it is vital to use a feminist perspective on ICT development. We need more feminist technologies, or at least a feminist lens in designing technology. Women activists are now too dependent on the patriarchal options. For example, if Facebook does not like a specific online campaign on women’s rights, it can remove all the work you have done in one swipe. Even in the online world, censorship, based on patriarchal values, is still a daily practice.”

### *What would a feminist Internet entail?*

“As part of its EROTICS program, APC organized a conference in Malaysia on gender, sexuality and the Internet, where the concept of a feminist Internet was explored. We wanted to rethink the way technology is conceived, designed, and used in practice. Instead of creating more problems, the Internet should contribute more to solving existing societal issues.

“At the meeting, we tried to zoom in on issues of sexuality and the Internet. Sexual violence and militarism are strongly connected. Sexual violence is being used to torture, control, and humiliate people. Similarly, militarism is about control, fear, power, and subjugating people, notably women. The Internet is one of the spaces where these two things come together; the tactics are all connected.

“As we try to establish a feminist Internet, also based on the needs in the Global South, we have to envision the Internet that we want. We can tell you all about what is wrong about the current Internet. But we do not know what the alternative is. Shaping an alternative needs strong connections between the free- and open-software movement and the women’s movement. We are planning to organize a feminist hackathon, with participants who can design technology that is feminist or supports feminist activism. This requires rethinking the idea of privacy, safety and security.

“We also have to look into other alternatives than just legal measures in case a woman experiences online violence. Many legal institutions, the police, and judges are not equipped yet to deal with online violence.”

### *What is the starting point for civil society in terms of raising awareness on the connections between gender, militarization and the Internet?*

“We would definitely like to encourage WHRD and civil-society organizations to approach the use of technology as a political act. I mean: to approach it in the same way you would choose where to hold a demonstration, or the way you would draft and disseminate a political statement. Such activities require a clear strategy, including an assessment of the risks and opportunities. We should think about ICTs and the Internet the same way.

“This starts with safeguarding your own data and information. Make sure that information about your family, or the location of a meeting, remains private. The more data that people can collect on you, the more vulnerable you will be. Some activists say it is impossible to hide everything. Indeed, governments and militias have all the sophisticated technology to track you. However, it is our task to make their job as difficult as possible. We need to do this by raising awareness about the information about yourself that you are giving away via ICTs, but also about the people you are closely connected to.

“As for the technical aspects, APC organizes seminars and workshops on secure online communication. Within these workshops, we discuss a feminist practice of technology, debate the challenges, use role-playing and simulation to uncover the risks, and provide tools to increase safety.”

➤ For more information about the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), go to [www.apc.org](http://www.apc.org)

