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## Young feminist movements: the power of technology

CHLOE SAFIER 26 August 2016

*Young feminists are coming of age in a tech-focused and tech-literate world and using technology to organize locally and globally. What does this mean for the future of gender equality?*



Digital art: "Rapists rape people not outfits" #RememberKhwezi. Photo: Holaa! Africa

In 2015, a Netherlands based group called [Women on Waves](#) coordinated with women's organizations in Germany and Poland to make mifepristone, known as the 'abortion pill,' available to women in Poland, where abortion is illegal. Using drones, they dropped the pills over the Polish border, where women were waiting to receive the shipment. Rebecca Gromperts, a medical doctor who founded Women on Waves, [told VICE news](#) "We're always looking for new ways to get through the loopholes of laws that restrict access to abortion." In this case, the loophole was that there are no criminal sanctions to taking the drug; it's just not available inside the boundaries of the Polish state. By using drones rather than more traditional methods of transporting the drug, the organization was able to bypass restrictive border controls and generate international media attention to their campaign for reproductive rights.

This example is indicative of two global trends that are shaping gender equality and women's rights issues right now. The first is that as the world becomes more globalized and more technologically advanced, there are powerful new tools for individuals mobilizing a collective voice for change, the costs of coordination have decreased, and the strategies and means of protest have multiplied. Young people (speaking here of youth aged 15-24, as defined by the UN) are particularly relevant to this trend, as they are a growing demographic that's come of age in a tech-focused and tech-literate world.

The second trend is that as legal frameworks become more progressive and supportive of women's rights in some parts of world, there is a gap between the laws and their implementation. In Bangladesh, for example, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for women but UNICEF reports that 29% of girls are married by age 15, and 65% are married before they turn 18. The 2006 Gender Equality Act in Nepal expanded women's rights in politics, land ownership and increased protections against violence, yet a 2012 survey found that 61.3% of women in Nepal were not aware of laws that address gender based violence and 48% of women reported experiencing violence at some point in their lives.

The 2011-2012 UN Women Progress of the World's Women found enormous strides towards progressive legal frameworks at national, regional and international levels in many parts of the world, but pervasive marginalization, discrimination and violence towards women persists. Social and cultural norms, access to resources, economic marginalization, access to justice, and information deficits have meant that progressive laws are not advancing just societies.

As a result, despite legislative progress, young women are facing sustained challenges to their reproductive rights, economic, political and social rights, as did the generations of women before them. In many countries, youth are visibly organizing and mobilizing to demand their state provides services or protections, or providing services where the state doesn't; that's nothing new. What *is* new, is the tools available to young feminist organizers to demand and provide their services and rights, and the potential- and risk that this creates.

FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund, where I currently work, is a youth-led fund that strengthens the participation and leadership of young feminist activists globally through their participatory grant-making model. FRIDA's 70+ grantee partners in over 60 countries in the global south are using technology in new ways to connect, advocate, influence and shift social norms. As an organization, we are supporting their important work, while also working to understand the implicit risks involved with a more public profile.



Fe-Male placard reading "I'm not a prize for men athletes, I'm an athlete myself" Photo: facebook #NotAnObject

In Lebanon, the legal framework does in some ways support women's rights; women are legally entitled to economic rights, full suffrage, and the right to run for office. But the reality is different: women often struggle to take out loans and are virtually excluded from decision-making positions in both public and private sectors. In response, more young women have also been joining major political parties and launching innovative campaigns to address the social norms that prevent women from claiming their rights. It helps that Lebanon is online and connected; as of the end of 2014, 80.4% of the population used the internet, with Facebook dominating the social media market. "Sell your products, Not

her body” is one of these online campaigns, started by the young feminist organization [Fe-Male](#) which aims to shed light on all types of gender discrimination.

In India, the high profile [sexual assaults](#) targeting women have since 2012 incited backlash and penal code reform. In 2013, the Indian government revised the Criminal Law to strengthen the laws on sexual offences, including specific provisions on sexual harassment and acid attacks, though [some women’s rights organizations felt the law did not go far enough](#). India has one of the fastest growing populations of internet users and has become a place for campaigning, shifting societal norms, and advancing women’s rights causes. FRIDA has partnered with the South Asia based Fearless Collective, a South Asia based collective of artists, activists, photographers and filmmakers who use art to replace fear with empathy specifically exploring themes of gender and sexuality. Starting in Indonesia, we’re working with [Fearless Collective](#) to host [workshops and public art creation events](#) around the world, to bring attention to issues of gender based inequality and violence. By using online networks to publicize the public art pieces across countries and networks, Fearless Collective is able to amplify the community level work in ways that wouldn’t have been possible ten or even five years ago.



"I am as you are": members of the young feminist group Transvoice in front of their wall painting in Bogor, West Java. Photo: Fabrice Bourgelle

In South Africa, despite strong laws that protect LGBTI rights, persistent homophobia in communities (and amongst law enforcers) mean that those who identify as LGBTI are often at risk; [“corrective” rape of black lesbian women is common](#). [HOLAfrica](#), founded in 2012, has responded to this crisis by creating online dialogue and a community on Facebook for young South Africans expressing diverse sexualities, gender identities and feminisms online.

The use of these new tools and initiatives ought to inspire new funding streams that will help women’s organizations understand the conditions under which young women’s rights activists are successfully using new technologies to demand their rights from the state and shift social norms in their communities. New technologies are gendered, in that those who have privilege (based on gender, race, identity, class, wealth, power or access) to use technology and devices to their advantage can have a louder, stronger voice in public and private spaces.

We need more information - and more information sharing - about when and how young women are using new technologies to demand their rights and create alternatives to state services and protections. We need better funded platforms to link young feminist activists to each other so they can learn from each other’s work. We need to fund more online and physical spaces between young feminist activists so that they can quickly and safely talk to each other about what strategies work.



Members of *Socially Keen Individuals Redefining Tech Spaces (SKIRTS)* at a digital security meeting in Nairobi. Photo: SKIRTS

And, we need to generate more knowledge and understanding around how employing new technologies expose young women to new kinds of risk, and more information around successful risk mitigation strategies. This fits into a broader conversation about identifying more funding - and new funding streams - to advance young feminist organizing, and ensure the sustainability and growth of the feminist and women's movements that are working on the frontlines for gender justice.

In my work, I've seen the remarkable collective power of young feminist activists who use technologies to amplify their voices across communities, states, and regions. The platforms and tools we currently have at our disposal can enable those voices to go farther and to have even greater impact. Figuring out how to best enable and support that to happen, while ensuring safety, is a critical next step.

**Members of FRIDA are joining thousands of activists at the forthcoming AWID Forum [Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice](#), 8-11 September, Bahia, Brazil. We are running a [feminist internet exchange](#), and a feminist tech hub with Mexican feminist organization [Palabra Radio](#) to broadcast a radio programme and podcasts during the Forum to amplify women and trans\* people's voices. See a full schedule of FRIDA's involvement on our [website](#).**

openDemocracy 50.50 will be [reporting daily](#) from the Forum

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