In February 2019, in Negombo, Sri Lanka, 47 researchers, practitioners and activists working on gender, sexuality and technology in South Asia came together for a two-day regional conference: Imagine A Feminist Internet: South Asia. Gender norms lay at the heart of our conversations – the way patriarchal social and cultural norms are reproduced digitally, the way these are negotiated and contested online, the way these norms restrict access to free participation in digital spaces.

Gender norms sit like an invisible layer below our digital lives, one we need to deal with if digital rights for all are to become a reality. Technology-based solutions alone won’t get us there. To really build a feminist internet, one that all women and marginalised genders can participate in, with agency, autonomy and a sense of belonging, we must hack gender norms, online and offline.
Imagine a world in which women own their digital bodies.

Women’s bodies are treated as public property online.

Women’s participation in digital spaces is monitored, controlled or surveilled.

Women and trans persons don’t feel they belong in digital spaces.

Consent is routinely overlooked, dismissed or not sought.

Good women don’t speak too much or too loudly, online or offline.

Privacy is imposed on women as a duty.

Consent is routinely overlooked, dismissed or not sought.

Women freely express themselves on all issues online, including sexual expression.

Privacy is a right for all genders.

Women who use digital devices can’t exercise their digital rights.

Digital lives and rights go hand in hand.

Women routinely face insecurity in digital spaces.

Imagine a world in which women feel secure in digital spaces.

Women and non-binary people are treated in discriminatory ways in digital domains.

Imagine an internet powered by equality.
Women’s participation in digital spaces is monitored, controlled or surveilled.

Imagine a world in which women freely participate in digital spaces.
Control of women’s sexuality lies at the heart of social morality, family values and community honour. Add mobile phones to the mix – which allow girls and women to roam freely online, explore romance and sexuality, make their own choices – and moral panic ensues. Benevolent patriarchal rhetoric is used to curtail young women’s access to digital spaces, framing it as protection, ‘for her own good’. Control lies in the hands of not just parents, but community leaders who ban phones, brothers who are tasked with keeping tabs on their sisters’ phones, and hidden boyfriends - who secretly give their girlfriends phones and then monitor and surveil them via the phones!

Girls are told that ‘good girls’ have joint social media accounts, don’t upload photos of themselves, and don’t go online at night, echoing all too familiar offline gender norms.

Digital platforms have turned into virtual public spaces for young women who increasingly use social media to explore their lives, selves and sexualities. How do we ensure they can use these ‘forbidden’ spaces freely? And no, the answers don’t lie online only. Let’s push gatekeepers to see digital spaces as opportunities, not threats – for women. Let’s push parents to lift controls so that women can create their own lives (which go beyond marriage). In the meantime, young women continue to perform little acts of subversion. They use pre-paid mobile plans that parents can’t monitor, they fake a ‘good girl’ image online to throw guardians off guard, and they develop peer networks to watch out for each other. This is the feminist internet in action: a supportive web of women looking out for each other while they defiantly navigate digital worlds.
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Women and trans persons don’t feel they belong in digital spaces.

Imagine a digital world that’s made for all genders.
Women in South Asia are often told not to ‘grab the tail of the leopard’ to discourage them from exploring online spaces or ‘loitering’ in public spaces. Even though hanging in a space builds comfort, confidence, belonging. Women who are not given either the time or the opportunity to build tech skills feel they don’t belong online. With this sense of not-belonging comes a lack of confidence. Many teenage girls are googling, but choose just the first or second result that pops up. The English-leaning web creates a sense of alienation among many: ‘this is not for us’. Low-income trans women searching for jobs online feel like interlopers, they say these sites are designed for educated people, ‘not people like us’. The question really is this: can you have agency in a space in which you feel you don’t belong?

So many factors shape that ephemeral sense of belonging in a space: its architecture, design, language, culture, community, power, etc. And the agency to not just be in, but to shape that space. Girls, women and queer persons are turning to newer platforms like TikTok to freely express their genders and sexualities. Women in Pakistan use ‘digital purdahs’ to control what they unveil online, walking a tightrope between self-determination and self-censorship. Let’s make digital literacy a core aspect of education for all, including gatekeepers. Let’s socialise women and girls to believe digital spaces are for them. Let’s stop banning platforms like TikTok on ephemeral grounds. Let’s reduce abuse online. Let’s push tech companies to build platforms for gendered users, not for non-existent ‘neutral users’. Because gender plays a huge role in our sense of belonging – and agency – online.
Women’s bodies are treated as public property online.

Imagine a world in which women own their digital bodies.
This happens in a million different ways. From daily comments on women’s clothes and bodies, to sexualized slurs, rape threats, and non-consensual image sharing. Generic images of a woman’s body posted online are interpreted as her sexualized ‘private’ part being offered up for consumption.12 Women in Kerala, India, say their boyfriends now advise them on how to ‘safely’ pose for pictures online: don’t cross your thighs, put both feet on the floor.13 A selfie in a sleeveless dress leads to comments about being ‘decent’. A student activist finds her non-sexual image on a semi-pornographic site marked as ‘porn’.14 Unsolicited porn clips show up on mixed-gender WhatsApp groups. Seventy percent of women in Pakistan say they are afraid of posting pictures online since they might be misused.15 Being forced to choose between ‘free expression’ and ‘bodily integrity’? That’s no solution.

Bodily integrity means at least these things: my body is mine. I decide its gender, how to care for and treat it, how to sex or intersex it, how to express it, how to share or keep it under wraps. It’s all about personal autonomy – over our bodies. To maintain bodily integrity on and offline, we need many things: overall autonomy and decision-making rights, consent, privacy, anonymity, data control, no surveillance. Digital images of our bodies are almost like body parts, parts of our bodies floating online. Let’s build an ethics of consent around how our bodies are spoken online: via text, images, whatever. Let’s reimagine our bodies floating invisibly online – as data.16 Let’s re-negotiate our rights with platforms around our data bodies, our digital doubles, via the lens of bodily integrity.17 Let’s make bodily integrity a thing!
Consent in digital spaces is informed, meaningful and put into practice.

Consent is routinely overlooked, dismissed or not sought.
Consent is marked as much by its absence as its presence in digital ecosystems. The way Indian laws on information technology are used indicate the low value placed on consent: complaints against rape videos (in which consent is violated three times – the rape itself, its filming, and its distribution) are often filed as ‘anti-obscenity’ offences, not as consent violations. Intimate images created with consent but distributed without consent are booked as ‘obscene’ or ‘indecent’, treating consensual image-creation as part of the problem, not just its non-consensual distribution. What about consent related to data, which is increasingly hard to separate from bodies? National databases that track and monitor reproductive health in India turn women’s bodies and data into instruments to meet state agendas around ‘family planning’. Like others, women have no say in how their data is collected, analysed and used.

How can we build consent between humans – and between humans and machines? Laws meant to ‘protect women’ need to emphasise consent; otherwise it’s just regressive ideas of womanhood and morality they’re protecting, while policing women’s free expression. Let’s recognise and address new consent issues that digital technologies throw up: dick pics, morphed images, etc. Digital sharing is all about sending and receiving; is it time to relook at sexual images received without consent – contextually – as harassment? Is it time to relook at morphed images not just as playful aspects of digital cultures, but also through the lens of consent? Let’s build a digital network of consent connecting bodies, data, users, apps, platforms, infrastructure, laws and policies - and sync it with consent offline. Let’s practice consent every time we click or swipe. Let’s make it real.
Good women don’t speak too much or too loudly, online or offline.

Women freely express themselves on all issues online, including sexual expression.
Women in South Asia – like children – are expected to be seen, not heard. Young women in Bangladesh hold back from speaking up online. They’re trapped in a cycle of silence, scared that if anything happens to them online, they will be blamed for it, married off and their education stopped. Police officers in Kerala, India, view opinionated, vocal women with suspicion, as unruly norm-breakers. Police officers who consider it ‘immodest’ and ‘shameful’ for women to be vocal online blame them for mass attacks they face online (‘Why did you say anything. You could have remained silent.’). Vocal women are condemned as ‘a disgrace to the family’, and the solution proposed to online abuse is self-censorship. If expression is thought of more broadly, women rarely have opportunities to express themselves on laws, policies or governance related to the internet.

Women use digital spaces to express themselves sexually. Women discover pleasure through porn and unlearn the idea that sex is inherently dangerous. Women in Pakistan use dating apps while hiding their identities. Young people discuss menstruation in the anonymity of chatrooms, things they feel ‘too shy or afraid to do in real life’. Let’s put sexual expression on the map as a legitimate aspect of free expression. Let’s factor in gendered barriers to expression. Women in India hesitate to use mobile voice-user interfaces in public out of safety concerns. Let’s ensure ‘freedom of expression’ is for all, not some, in a free, open and secure internet. And let’s salute those who speak up against social censorship and harassment. As a rural journalist from India said, ‘When other people see you standing up for yourself, that can bring change too.’
Privacy is imposed on women as a duty.

Privacy is a right for all genders.
Privacy is a gendered phenomenon. Scholar Anita Allen notes how the 19th century ‘ideology of “true womanhood” and the “cult of domesticity” justified the confinement of women in the “private” household… Privacy is tied to “expectations of female self-concealment and seclusion in the name of modesty”, even though these have greatly diminished.\(^{31}\) This remains the defining frame in South Asia: ensuring that women adhere to strict social codes that define their physical lives, particularly around interacting with men. Parents, brothers, boyfriends, husbands routinely check women’s call logs and messages. A ‘private’ password on a girl’s phone is viewed with suspicion; married women are expected to share passwords with spouses.\(^{32}\) Women using voice-based interactive technologies (hailed as a tool for digital inclusion) in India say privacy is a major barrier; they worry about being overheard or followed in public spaces.\(^{33}\)

Let’s start with an inside-out view of privacy so that women – and other marginalised genders – define what privacy means to them. How can this understanding inform user interactions, technology design and policy perspectives? How can privacy be understood as a continuum flowing on and offline? Privacy has different meanings; people from marginalised castes or religions create alternative social media accounts in names that mask these identities.\(^{34}\) Trans women create accounts with male identities to appease their families and maintain private accounts as trans women.\(^{35}\) Young women in Pakistan maintain a ‘digital purdah’, using privacy settings to control who they interact with on social media.\(^{36}\) Let’s recognise and uphold these manifestations of privacy and turn digital spaces into places of possibility and freedom. And simultaneously address privacy in relation to data, artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies.
Women who use digital devices can’t exercise their digital rights.

Digital lives and rights go hand in hand.
While digital devices are deeply intertwined in the lives of women in South Asia, there’s a yawning chasm between ‘lives’ and ‘rights’. So many things contribute to this. Digital rights are still based on the myth of the ‘neutral user’ as if those who inhabit digital spaces have no gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, or occupation. Gender and sexuality rights are still conceptualised within offline, physical world frames. When women aren’t seen as rights holders, women’s rights are positioned as alien, foreign concepts. Systems of justice and power do not recognise and uphold rights; 50% of online harassment cases in Nepal are dismissed. In a context where rights are unevenly understood and inequitably applied, digital rights are one step further removed, even though online and offline rights are tangled like wool, weaving through and shaping one another.

How do we make it easier for women to know about and understand their digital rights – and how these connect to their daily lives? Giving women language for their experiences of violations online, and educating them about the law, legal processes and options is a good place to start. Let’s break down the idea that experiences in the online are separate from the offline, and somehow less serious, so that women can see that digital rights are an integral aspect of human rights. Let’s make sure laws and policies recognise the concrete harms that people experience and that laws are based on upholding rights, instead of ‘protecting women’. Let’s push platforms to recognise rights that users have on sites they run. Let’s demand responsiveness, transparency and accountability, and open up opaque spaces – from algorithms to governance – for public scrutiny.
Women routinely face insecurity in digital spaces.

Imagine a world in which women feel secure in digital spaces.
Insecurity is the outcome of many factors. Online violence is so routine that journalists and activists consider it an inevitable part of the terrain, just another barrier you have to cross in order to do your job. Tech-enabled violence often combines with offline violence, amplifying harm. What women consider unwanted harassment, men see as ‘innocent fun’: calls from unknown numbers proposing marriage, continuous ‘I love you’ messages and non-stop requests for pictures. There’s little redress; the police routinely brush away such complaints. Families discourage filing formal complaints, seeing the ‘case’ as a cause for shame. In India, women from lower castes and rural areas, among others, have lower levels of trust in the police. But digital security goes way beyond online abuse. Dataveillance and other forms of mass surveillance create insecurities that many women don’t know of or recognise.

Digital security is about protecting bodies and data. Let’s accept that technology-enabled abuse is real, like any abuse. And that it affects many rights and freedoms. Across South Asia, girls and women lose their rights to education, work and mobility if intimate images of them start circulating online, often without their knowledge or consent. They’re pulled out of schools and colleges and stopped from working. Let’s recognise harms that sit uneasily on the border between crime and normal – what women identify as harassment, but men normalise. Let’s create supportive families and supportive online communities: women identify them as key to dealing with abuse. Let’s accept that security cannot exist without privacy; that privacy – of data and bodies – is itself a form of security. And let’s firmly debunk the myth that mass surveillance creates security.
Women and non-binary people are treated in discriminatory ways in digital domains.

Imagine an internet powered by equality.
The glaring digital gender gap begins with access to digital devices. Women in India are 46% less likely than men to own phones, and the gender gap is 37% in Pakistan, 34% in Bangladesh, 28% in Myanmar and 19% in Nepal. Unlike boys, young girls are often forced to quit online spaces after minor negative experiences; some women don’t publicly share their gender on social media profiles to protect themselves. Discrimination is expressed towards those with diverse sexual and gender identities via queer- and transphobic speech, harassment and abuse. In the eSports arena, women gamers are often undermined; those who speak up face threats and harassment focusing on their gender.

With patriarchy relentlessly reproducing gendered norms online – from digital cultures and comments to hypersexualised female gaming characters – digital spaces feel less than equal. They feel made for men.

Imagine homes where girls, boys and non-binary kids are given digital devices at the same ages, with the same freedoms to use them. Communities in which girls and trans persons are brought up as actors – with rights – not as passive bystanders. (The digital is only one part of a bigger life; we need to think broad. We need to think life). Societies in which we recognise the full gender spectrum, not just male-female binaries. Interestingly, eSports offers us a unique opportunity to reimagine gender: since there are no physical bodies online, why separate players into genders? Let’s give this a think. Let’s power up digital equality by putting it all into practice: autonomy, agency, bodily integrity, consent, free expression, privacy, security, rights and freedoms. And governance: more women and non-binary folks, please! Let’s dismantle privilege and power up equality.
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Imagine A Feminist Internet: South Asia was hosted by Point of View and the Internet Democracy Project.

Based in Mumbai, India, Point of View builds and amplifies women’s voices and removes barriers to voice, speech and expression. Our program on gender, sexuality and technology equips women, trans and queer people to freely – and fearlessly – inhabit digital spaces.

The Internet Democracy Project works towards realising feminist visions of the digital in society, by exploring and addressing power imbalances in the areas of norms, governance and infrastructure, through in-depth research, advocacy and debate.