

THE TRAIL BLAZER

NIGHAT DAD

The Urban Unit speaks to Ms. Nighat Dad – a known digital rights activist and change-maker as she reveals her criteria for responsible digital innovation



Urban Geographic: You are a trailblazer for digital rights, particularly for women. How did you start on your compelling professional journey from lawyer to advocate to policy maker?

Nighat Dad: Being a female lawyer in Pakistan is itself a challenge, given how patriarchal our society is. After completing my law degree, I worked at a law firm for a year. Making your space in the workplace and being taken seriously as a female lawyer are two of the biggest challenges I faced. The culture at law firms in Pakistan is extremely exploitative, especially towards women.

During my journey as a lawyer, I realized how difficult it was for women to access legal assistance. The entire system is rigged in favor of patriarchy, which means that women have to put up with more hurdles in their way when they decide to access legal assistance. To make matters worse, there is very little consciousness, especially among Pakistani women, about the procedures and ways to access legal assistance. All of these experiences made me realize that I had to do

Citizens have a right to know how their personal information is being collected and processed. As smart cities move towards the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic decision-making, these questions will become much more urgent.

something beyond my job as a lawyer. And that is when I decided to set up the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF). The project is very close to my heart because it gives me an ideological purpose and meaning in life. Before forming my own organization, I had turned to working in civil society organizations. Even as I founded a non-profit, my legal training never left me so I stayed engaged with policy work, combining advocacy work that combines my skills as a lawyer and an activist.

UG: What are some of the key findings and accomplishments of the Digital Rights Foundation over the years?

ND: In six years ever since it was founded, the Digital Rights Foundation has worked on issues of online spaces and has been at the forefront of mainstreaming gender and feminist perspectives in internet governance approaches. One of our most successful campaigns has been the 'Hamara Internet' campaign, which means 'our internet' in Urdu. Through the campaign, we have created material for digital security geared towards Pakistani women as well as conducted sessions for young girls across Pakistan.

We have also founded the cyber-harassment helpline that provides direct services to victims of online harassment. The helpline has assisted people in over 3,000 cases now and continues to expand. Over the years, we have created networks of journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders in Pakistan to provide them with support in terms of digital security, legal advice and psycho-social well-being.

Cyber Harassment Helpline:

0800-39393



While robust laws and enforcement are a crucial component to protecting the most vulnerable among us in online spaces, it is also important to bear in mind that these protections need to go hand in hand with dismantling the offline and online structures that underpin the inequalities.

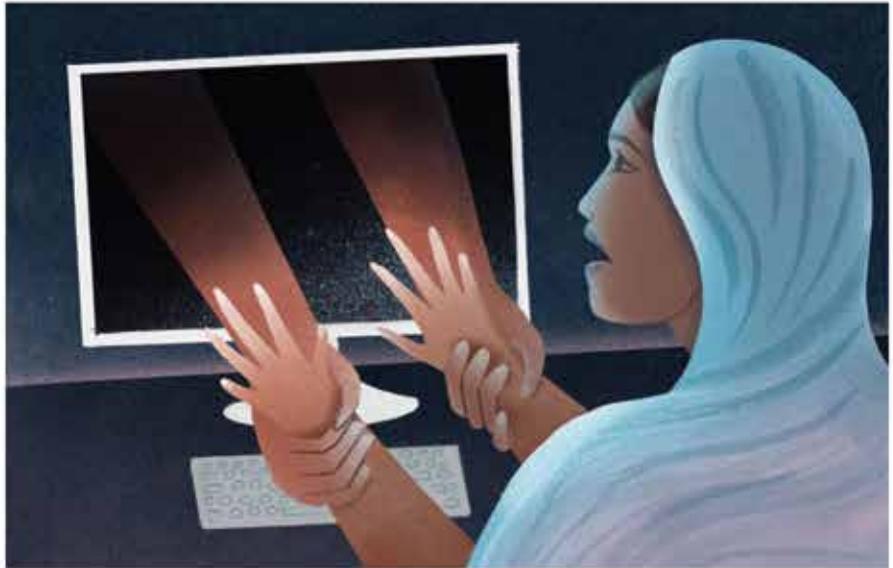
UG: Now that the world is turning towards smart cities, what are the criteria that need to be kept in mind for responsible digital innovation?

ND: In Pakistan, like the rest of the world, technology has been introduced without a corresponding regulatory framework to protect the rights of citizens. This has meant that projects such as the Safe Cities project is monitoring our urban spaces without corresponding transparency or data protection required in a democracy where citizens have a right to know how their personal information is being collected and processed. As smart cities move towards the use of

artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic decision-making, these questions will become much more urgent. The impact of these questions is far bigger in the context of a country like Pakistan, where even basic democratic freedoms continue to remain a far-fetched dream and violation of such freedoms remains a routine practice.

UG: Can criteria outlined in the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (New York, Amsterdam, Barcelona) be implemented in Pakistan?

ND: The core principles of the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights are crucial to any use of technology for policing and urban monitoring. In the absence of a data protection law in Pakistan or any ethical guidelines on the use of algorithmic decision-making, the declaration by the coalition can be a useful starting point. However, there is hardly any initiative on the part of public bodies and municipalities to engage with or legislate on these issues.



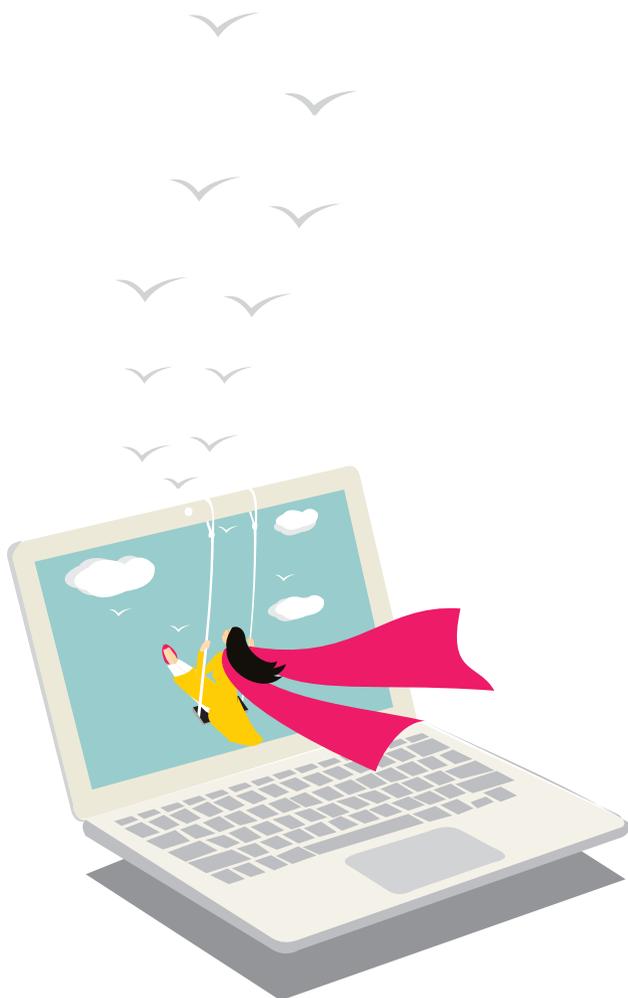
A more long-term solution lies in challenging the current paradigms regarding content regulation and protection that is controlled by tech companies and nation-states.

UG: Do you agree or disagree with the statement that smart cities can be guardians of digital rights?

ND: At times, the ethos of smart cities feels antithetical to the principles of digital rights given their dependence on technology developed by private companies and the reliance on mass collection of data. Given that smart cities are synonymous with practices such as predictive policing, which give way to problems of discrimination, the integration of digital rights approaches are often seen as after-thoughts in the larger scheme of smart cities.

UG: Who would you describe as the most vulnerable entities when it comes to digital exploitation and cyber harassment? What can be done to protect them?

ND: Marginalization that exists in offline spaces, such as those based on gender, ability, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, are often replicated in online spaces as well. These inequalities manifest in the form of online harassment and violence against women, religious minorities, queer individuals, the disabled and the common working poor in general.



While robust laws and enforcement are a crucial component to protecting the most vulnerable among us in online spaces, it is also important to bear in mind that these protections need to go hand in hand with dismantling the offline and online structures that underpin the inequalities. Justice in individual cases requires effective and gender-sensitive approaches taken by law enforcement. However, a more long-term solution lies in challenging the current paradigms regarding content regulation and protection that is controlled by tech companies and nation-states.

UG: Are surveillance and algorithms there for protection or are they a violation of civil rights and privacy? Where should one draw the line?

ND: Mass surveillance embedded in models of surveillance capitalism have emerged as sites of massive violations of civil liberties such as privacy, free speech and non-discrimination. Surveillance as a form of protection is often a red herring. We have seen throughout history that it has been used to monitor, single out and target populations, and particularly the oppressed and exploited sections, as a form of control. Surveillance as a means of governance and control, enhanced by emergence technologies, are a cause of great concern for me as a digital rights activist. Algorithmic decision-making is happening at such a large scale and in a non-transparent manner that it has meant a loss of control over decisions taken regarding their economic, social and political wellbeing.