Persona Profiles & Stories

Who is in the Digital Rights and Security Space?

Digital rights and security is a field that is all-encompassing of various subject based expertise, and soft and hard skills. The ecosystem exemplifies the '21-century' labor market, and the rapidly evolving issues, trends, technologies, and policies.

Throughout our research with 56 practitioners from Central Asia, Balkans, Eastern Europe, Africa, Mena, Latin America, we mapped 6 major personas who are most representative among the people who interviewed. This may also represent a significant number of people within digital rights and security currently.

These personas, while they are created from real life accounts of practitioners in the field, are fictional. We assessed, documented and carefully crafted the profiles. While interacting with these personas you may either resonate with a specific profile, see yourself within multiple profiles, or none.

Why Did We Create This?

The Simple Answer: Everyone wants to know how anyone got into digital rights, security, justice and public interest technology sectors.

The Long Answer: Unlike many traditional fields such as medicine, civil engineering or law which have set pathways that enable one to build a career within the space, digital rights and justice includes people from multiple backgrounds and expertise. It is also an emerging field with very few standardized pathways into the field. Consider it as a typical generalist sector.

Our goal with these stories is to demonstrate the non-linear trajectory of many experts, specialists and practitioners within the field today. The short-term hope is that you are also able to draw lessons from these stories to identify how to craft your pathway. On the longer term and from a more structural perspective, however, these stories also depict the need for more standardized pathways that enable existing professionals to grow, while ensuring a generational sustainability of digital rights and security.

Some gaps in our study however, is that there are very few early career professionals we captured in this study, with most of the research participants in senior or mid-career positions.

Rija

A Feminist Organization Founder, Digital Safety Activist

Rija's Journey into Digital Rights

Rija is a digital rights defender who began her journey as a feminist organizer and advocate working on sexual and reproductive rights and justice. She got introduced to digital rights, specifically feminist internet and intersectionality around the internet discourse in the early 2010s and eventually worked with prominent organizations within the field. Rija found a way to incorporate an intersectional feminist perspective into sexual rights, digital technologies and other social fields of work. These inspired her to co-found a feminist organization with a specific focus on the intersectionality between gender, sexuality and technology. Rija believes that there was no specific incident to becoming a digital safety activist. However, it was a natural transition into digital rights and feminist discourse on the internet.

Rija's Work Journey

Work Life, Challenges and Goals

Rija primarily conducts research, workshop training and regional and international level advocacy. Her organization spearheaded various projects and publications during the course of their work.

Rija's goal is to create safer and free digital spaces for everyone, thus Rija's work focuses on creating online spaces that caters to the needs of women, and a space where other marginalized communities can exercise their freedom of expression. The larger framing their work of centers agency and bodily autonomy. The organization was inspired by instances where digital rights work, gender and sexuality was not considered as an important topic to focus on. As such Rija faced challenges where in larger forums or engagements people would question why she is 'bringing' the gender conversation to technology.

While she advanced the gender, sexuality and technology discourse, Rija experienced internal contestation between the topics she wanted to explore through her organization. She grappled with whether to focus on data privacy, data governance and how it fits within the larger conversation around sexuality. Finally, Rija and her colleagues arrived at a middle ground where their work on freedom of expression would center on sexual expression, their work on privacy would be framed through a feminist perspective, and address how legalities around data protection does not protect marginalized communities.

Inspiration:
Gender.
Sexuality.
Misinformation.
Data governance.
Reproductive Justice.
Privacy and bodily autonomy.
Online Gender Based Violence.
Freedom of Expression, Access & autonomy.
Intersections of Gender Sexuality & technology.

Frustrations:
Digital Authoritarianism.
Inequities within funding systems.
Structural Biases against feminist organization.
Redundancy in the work of different organizations.
Non-supportive networks: Competition among organizations working within the space.
Limited resources that have constraints on her organization's potential.
Overworked due to having to spread oneself thin: Limits capacity building since only a few have the time and luxury to engage in training.

Needs
Capacity building to build an ecosystem.
Funding to grassroots and feminist activitsts and organizations.
For a sustainable and supportive network within digital rights and security.
Specializations to limit redundancies of the work within the digital rights and security space. This is dependent on access to funding and funders who support autonomy.

Guillermo

Human Rights Lawyer

Guillermo's Journey into Digital Rights

Guillermo started in the field 4 years ago as a research assistant in a Latin American organization working on digital rights, project monitoring and security, data privacy. He points out that the rest of the civil society organizations in the country he works in are dedicated to armed conflict, transitional justice, peasant women, Afro-latina and Caribbean people, indigenous women, and science. The organization , Kilombo, is the only one working on issues at the intersection of technology and human rights. According to Guillermo, being a practitioner is a major way to specialize in technology and human rights because there are no universities that provide direct support despite the fact that the internet is such an important part of our lives.

Guillermo's Work Journey

Work Journey, Challenges and Goals

Guillermo's organization is dedicated to promoting human rights, it is also a think tank, and an association of academics who have interests in working on different topics. He has worked on developing themes on technology transparency, strategic litigation, surveillance, environment and human rights since 2019. Guillermo believes that these themes are intersectional, and thrives to develop his expertise by learning from other regions in the world.

Some of Guillermo's concerns are that the digital rights space is very ageist because many people do not have a connection with younger people. He also expresses difficulties in measuring human rights progress since there are no clear indicators and rights work is long term and continuous. Guillermo is concerned about the fragmentation of networks involving multiple stakeholders who do not always implement impactful solutions.

Inspiration:
Security.
Net neutrality.
Strategic litigation.
Privacy and freedom.
Environment and Human Rights.
Sustainable networks and associations.
Transparent technology development & deployment.

Frustrations:
Ageism.
Private protocols.
Low digital literacy.
Competitive funding.
Internet not being free.
Clear measurement Indicators for Human Rights Work.
Few organizations in digital rights (tech and human rights).
Low motivation amongst women and limited access to the internet.

Needs
Financial Support.
Participatory Policy.
Mental health support.
Digital rights trainings.
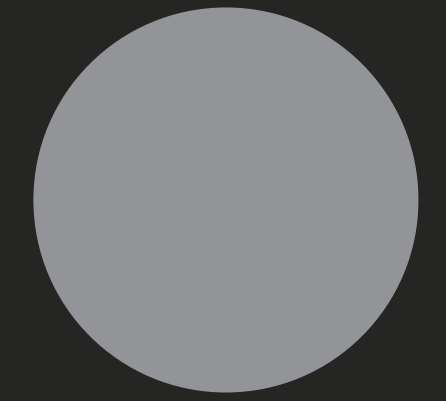Inclusive/Diverse communities: Inclusion of self-recognised groups & of different ethnicities.

Fatoumata

Journalist; Covers Media, Digital Rights and Data Governance

Fatoumata's Journey Into digital rights

Fatoumata's background is in journalism. After almost 10 years, she switched to internet governance. It was not an intentional switch however, it was by default, given that media began evolving into the digital. Fatoumata was working in broadcasting and was involved in setting up community radio stations. By 2011, they believed it was time to transition from the broadcasting space, thus, began working on internet governance. Fatoumata began engaging with other digital rights and civil society organizations by providing them with broadcasting perspectives whenever they needed support on broadcast law.

Fatoumata's Work Journey

Work Journey, Challenges and Goals

Fatoumata supported the research on the dark side of ICTs on women and cybercrime. She has been working within digital rights for over 20 years because she believes that setting up community broadcasting stations was also an advocacy for digital rights. Fatoumata's goal is to ensure that people can express themselves safely online and by using secure networks, without anyone infringing on their rights.

On the other hand, Fatoumata struggles to conceptualize or articulate digital rights work and is worried that many people consider it as 'making noise'. Similarly, advocacy is very long-term which eventually becomes uninspiring. Fatoumata also shares that building trusted networks or getting people to trust your work makes working in digital rights very difficult.

Inspiration:
Community Building.
Access to the internet.
Gender and cybercrime.
Documenting the adverse effects of technology.
Information and communications technology research.

Frustrations:
Funding.
Legal Reforms.
Online harassment.
Access to trainings and Materials.
Low quality internet infrastructure: Cost of internet and low connectivity.

Needs
Online safety.
Equitable access to funding.
ICT infrastructure investment.
Capacity building, and quality/timeline development of training resources & materials.

Sthembiso

Digital Security Specialist, Co-founder of Civil Society Organization

Sthembiso's Journey Into Digital Security

Sthembiso is a digital security professional with over 10 years of experience in the industry. He studied Computer Science for his undergraduate program and worked within the field for a few years. Most of Sthembiso's certifications are technical certifications however, later he also volunteered with a Human Rights organization in Southern Africa. He supported within different roles in the organization, until he got the opportunity to engage in a program to train trainers. Through this, he attended the digital rights gatherings and conferences, and got excited by a community of whom he describes as 'vaguely digital rights' which he resonated with. After this, Sthembiso collaborated with some of his colleagues as the graduates of the training to co-found an organization in Southern Africa. He has also worked as a lecturer in some Universities in the region.

Sthembiso's Work Journey

Work Journey, Challenges and Goals

Sthembiso currently focuses on an organization he co-founded to support risk groups in Africa with their security needs and provides training to other trainers to expand the network of digital security trainers in Africa. He also improves the security capacity of individual organizations to be aware of the digital threats that they face on a daily basis and how to counter them or circumvent some of these threats using trusted tools. Sthembiso's goal is to ensure that every organization becomes resilient to threats. He also explores ways to localize digital security training and content. While Sthembiso has a technical computer science background, he is a self-taught security specialist.

When Sthembiso began his work, digital safety and security within the rights space was emerging. There was little to no funding support for the early organizations in the ecosystem. As such most of the people who founded his organization worked pro bono for a long time. They navigated these challenges through freelancing until reaching points of burn out, ultimately affecting his relationship with other practitioners.

Inspiration:
Ensure every individual organization becomes resilient to threats online and offline.

Frustrations:
Localized content.
Lack of human resources.
Increasing Government interference.
Technical language resources into plain language.
Funding; Having to work for free , and doing other part-time work to subsidize.
Political and legislative threats : New cyber laws that will affect activists, CSOs and HRDs.
Building trust: Trust is usually built from organizational endorsement, trainers who don't have it struggle to gain trust from others.
Increased hostility and sophisticated attacked through NSOs, where defenders are not equipped with skills and resources to fight back.

Needs
Funding.
Mindset change.
Increase local trainers.
Scalable interventions.
Transferable knowledge.
More holistic security Models.
More government participation.
Expanded Community Collaboration.
Grassroot Digital security Awareness.
Contextualized Digital Security Curriculums.
Localisation of safety and security resources.
Training for practitioners to produce better outcomes.
Inclusive and diverse trainers based on gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity.

Aikorkem

Senior Policy Analyst, Cyber Security Specialist and Project Manager in regional Civil Society Organization

Aikorkem's Journey Into digital Security

Aikorkem however during her career she began to explore technology, peoples use and access, from a human rights and sociological lense. Aikorkem also specializes in the field of cybersecurity. Aikorkem began teaching young people and women digital skills, that is, ways to use emails and eventually ventured into security. She has been in the industry for more than 20 years, and is now regarded as a senior-level digital security specialist and professional. She has worked as a digital security trainer since the early 2000s and has been a software development consultant with notable media and technology companies and NGOs.

Aikorkem's Work Journey

Work Journey, Challenges and Goals

Aikorkem's work investigates the best methods to protect personal data and trains people on security using open source tools. She has also worked on various publications and internet security methodology, they currently also run a NGO that researches tech and health and digital technology access for women and girls. She has advised on definitions on digital rights of citizens, and regulating the internet. Aikorkem believes that the space is sufficiently funded, and with personal and small networks, they are able to provide each other with support and professional growth in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, she acknowledges that gaining certification in the space can be very costly, which makes it increasingly inaccessible for many people.

Inspiration:
Legal Systems.
Data Protection.
Internet Regulation.
Digital Security and computer Literacy.
Digital security research and innovative methodologies.
Include more women in cybersecurity and digital security.

Frustrations:
Repression.
Security Literacy.
Low digital literacy among women.

Needs
International collaborations.
Affordable digital security training.

Nhung

Computer Scientist. Digital Security Specialist. Pro-democracy movement builder.

Nhung's Journey Into Digital Security

Nhung describes themselves as a pro-democracy movement builder. They worked on building and coaching movements during the time Facebook became popular and many people used blogging as a form of activism and to express repress and dissent in SouthEast Asia. During the time, they realized how activists and rights groups like theirs were being targeted by the state and law enforcement. Spyware and cyber attacks also became prevalent, yet there was not much information or any awareness raising around this kind of habits in SouthEast Asia and many other non-western countries. Nhung shares that because many people were being arrested and many issues on digital hygiene were rising amongst activist groups, they began teaching themselves digital security specifically on ways to circumvent the information controls that were being put in place in their country. However, Nhung's work has evolved since then. While they still work on movement support, they focus on how to layer in digital safety, and digital resilience in movement building and activism.

Nhung's Work Journey

Work Journey, Challenges and Goals

Nhung's digital security skills were mostly self taught, at different times, they were also a part of formal training conducted for organizations. Thus over the years Nhung has built their career, and works in digital security and rights. They support rights groups around the world and focus on holistic security in particular, cybersecurity, but also physical security. Their position within the industry as an expert requires them to wear many other hats. They, however, still continue providing movement support for pro democracy, grassroots networks, globally, in particular Southeast Asia.

However, for people like Nhung, there is no clear professional pathway and space for growth. For sometime, Nhung could not conceptualize or place a value for their work because within the rights space the lack of clear terms and pathways for security professionals affects how much they are paid or valued for their work. Similarly, there are not clear security protocols for rights groups unlike big corporations and iNGOs, thus security personnel like Nhung use trust-based networks, which require extensive time and recognition to develop. There is also no sustainable funding, and networks that allow them to build an inter-generational movement, which they believe would be essential to sustaining the movement. Given the shrinking civic space, and the rapid advancement of adversaries, digital security personnel, according to Nhung, are unable to catch up with critical threats such as NSO when journalists are affected. Their current diagnosis is outdated, and their work happens as a matter of necessity.

Inspiration:
Digital Safety.
Protecting Rights groups.
Democracy movement building.
Resilient Organizational security.
Digital security literacy in Schools.
Ensuring attitude change among people in orgs and networks.

Frustrations:
Privacy and security.
Sustainability of the field.
Practitioners mental health.
Over-capacitated security trainers.
Solidarity depending on affiliations.
No materials in their native languages.
No clear professional or career Pathway.
No formal certification in the rights space.
Biased funding models; Financial Constraints.
No security tools and protocols for rights groups.

Needs
Localisation.
Specialization.
Long term Funding.
Mental Health support.
More up-to date materials.
Generational Sustainability.
Affordable training certifications.
Building sustainable communities.
Resources which include security tools and protocols.