Interview with **GNI's Vice Chair, Usama Khilji**

Usama Khilji is a digital rights activist with over 15 years experience in campaigning for free speech, privacy rights, and rights to access to information. He is cofounder and Director of GNI civil society member Bolo Bhi.

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Vice Chair



How did you come to work in digital rights?

> My digital rights journey began as an undergraduate student in Pakistan in 2010, when I could not access Facebook because the government blocked it due to somebody, somewhere in the world, creating an event they found offensive. The logic behind such censorship baffled me, motivating me to advocate against it — So it was rather personal!

How do you think the digital rights landscape has changed since you entered the field?

> When I entered the sector, "digital rights" was a little known concept; I remember creating press kits for the media to familiarize them with now basic concepts. The world is a lot more aware now, and there is a lot of interest. On the other hand, global geopolitical shifts have meant that international human rights law is secondary as security narratives dominate, and the technology sector competes to cater to this dominance at the risk of rights. As the global digital rights community, it is incumbent upon us to keep rights relevant in global conversations, and to compel states and companies to continue to abide by instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the UN Guiding Principles on Business on Human Rights (UNGPs). GNI has been a consistent voice in advocating for human rights as a central tenet of any advancement.

How did you come to GNI, and what has stood out to you throughout the different roles you've had in the organization?

I joined GNI in 2019 as a civil society board member representing Bolo Bhi, replacing my dear friend and cofounder Sana Saleem after she stepped down. In that time, I saw the organization expand in membership and undergo its first strategic review, which ultimately changed the composition of the GNI Board and began to further democratize the company accountability process. In my transition to Vice Chair over the past two years, my focus and GNI's has been on broadening engagement with the membership and getting feedback on how their experience of GNI can improve – this is all aimed at thinking more intentionally about GNI's place in the wider digital rights ecosystem.

What stands out the most from my experience here is how historical, cultural, and regional differences impact the way our diverse membership interacts with each other and the network – especially in terms of power differentials – and how much more work there is to do for meaningful engagement across the network and the sector as a whole. Multinational tech companies are overwhelmingly headquartered in the Global Minority and cater to the cultural and legal environments that are local to them, but their services are used well beyond that sphere. GNI does the hard work of facilitating direct dialogue across this divide.

How do you think the digital rights landscape has changed since you entered the field?

The biggest strength of GNI is its conscious effort to evolve as technology, politics, and the digital rights sector rapidly change, which is done through a consultative process that includes companies, civil society, academia, and investors – all four constituencies that make up the GNI network. In recent years we have focused on globalizing our membership, and as a result GNI is increasingly more representative of the world we live in than it was when I joined.

Notably, participation in the accountability function of the network is a lot more inclusive. When I first came to GNI, participation in the assessment process was closed such that details were only available to members of the Board. In this latest cycle, eligibility has now opened up to the entire membership. I have continued to be deeply involved in the Accountability Committee in addition to my role on the Board because, for me, this function is central to what GNI is. GNI also now has a dedicated AI governance project that focuses on amplifying voices from the global majority – something that is, so far, rare in the technology sector.

What does GNI provide for you? What distinguishes it from other digital rights initiatives?

Personally, I treasure the chance to regularly meet passionate and brilliant people from across sectors. The relationships I've built with many of those people, who have become like family over the years, is the cherry on top of it all. These enriching friendships enable unique learning along with solidarity that all of us need.

Speaking to what distinguishes GNI in the landscape of digital rights initiatives, it is easy in this space to get entrenched in a particular perspective. GNI's multistakeholder nature, our commitment to consensus-based decisions among those stakeholder groups, and a regular mechanism for accountability of member technology companies on freedom of expression and privacy rights make GNI a truly unique and effective space in a policy environment that can feel stuck in bureaucracy.

What are some challenges and opportunities ahead that you have your eye on?

Aligning international respect for human rights law is a major challenge facing the world right now, and the military use of technology developed by companies that hold vast swathes of our data is a major challenge for humanity, as is its purchase by governments that use it against their populations.

Opportunities exist in brave communities of people across the world challenging power structures that undermine rights of people; whether that is at companies, in the media, or against governments with authoritarian tendencies. In particular, I have been energized by the young people organizing in South Asia and across the world, who are leading that effort and providing a very much needed ray of hope we have all been seeking.