

# The Voice Behind the Speech: Young Women in UN Conventions

by Lorna Israel and Carol Bello

**T**he youth are caught in a definition-overlap. The 1985 International Youth Year promoted the idea that youth are 'persons between 15-24 years old.' The Convention on the Rights of the Child considers children as those in the 0-18 age bracket. The 'age of majority' in most countries is fixed at 18 years old, after which they are considered 'adult.'

As a product of political regimes (popularly referred to as government or inter-government), this definition-overlap is undisputed. In fact, it immediately settles questions of who or what qualifies as youth. The definitions are barely questioned anymore, not even for the sake of argument. Thus so labelled, the youth could now be spoken to—by the very same institutions that created them. Having been spoken to, the youth are now also speaking. But first, a 'vocal' mechanism has to be assembled.

## The Creation of the Youth in the UN System

The integration of the youth in the United Nations (UN) system can be traced to the early years after the UN was established. The Social Development Division

had already carried youth-related activities between 1946 and 1960, its work leading to the creation of the Inter-Agency Youth Liaison Unit (based in Switzerland) and the United Nations Youth Unit (in New York). Together, these two units, were responsible for the holding of the First UN World Youth Assembly in 1970. Nine years later, they were incorporated with the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (in Vienna).

The Youth Unit of the UN assumed a new responsibility as the General Assembly's Secretariat for the 1985 International Youth Year. Headquartered in New York, the Youth Unit is part of the Division for Social Policy and Development. It now serves as the secretariat for the United

Nations World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, and the United Nations Youth Information Network (UNYIN). To date, the presence of the youth is attested to by at least 23 UN Conventions, Covenants and Recommendations. They have been debated, agreed upon and adopted by member states within a five-decade span (1965-2000). References to young women are spread across these UN documents.

The first UN document on the youth was the 1965 Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples. But since the 1985 International Youth Year, at least 17 declarations and programme of actions on the youth have been crafted under the guidance of the UN's General Assembly. Six of them pertain specifically to the youth while the rest are about development issues that have separate provisions on the importance of the youth.

Conventions specifically on the youth since 1985 include the:

- Guidelines for Further

Planning and Follow-up in the Fields of Youth (1985)

- Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985)

- Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of Their Liberty (1990)

- World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (1995)

- Braga Youth Action Plan (1998) and the

- Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes (1998).

The youth are also mentioned in UN Declarations adopted within the last ten years. These are the:

- Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development Agenda 21 (1992)

- Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993)

- Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994)

- Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development (1995)

- Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995)

- Habitat Agenda and Istanbul Declaration of the UN Conference on Human Settlements (1996)

- Rome Declaration on

World Food Security and World Summit Plan of Action of the World Food Summit (1996)

- ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), and the
- Special Session on Social Development (2000).

The youth's 'imagination, ideals, and energies,' which framed the 1985 International Youth Year, became the organising concept for integrating the youth in the UN system. It subsequently guided and has been repeatedly invoked in succeeding UN Conventions and Platform for Actions, youth-oriented or not. Since then, the youth have been rendered ageless, perpetualised as 'imaginative, idealistic and energetic.'

Every preamble of the latest UN declaration or platform for action on social development issues bears the memory of a previous one (as can be seen in the tendency to use "recall that," "cognisant of," "bearing in mind that," etc). Declarations pertaining to the youth also commit to their memory declarations asserted in non-youth declarations, conventions and programme of actions.

To a large extent, the language informing the declarations and conventions on the youth echoes that

which can be considered 'adult.' And because 'youth' and the 'adult' are of the same coeval time (sharing the same time zone and

ence current social and economic conditions and well-being and livelihood of future generations...

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memory plane), it is nearly impossible to sift and isolate the 'imagination, ideals and energies' of the youth. What can only be filtered out is the very term youth. The declarations of the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond is an illustration, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

The *General Assembly*,  
Recognizing that *young people* in all countries... are resource for development and key agents for social change...

Bearing in mind... the challenges and potentials of *young people* are addressed by policy will influ-

Acknowledging that *young women and men* in all parts of the world aspire to full participation in the life of society...

Acknowledging the contribution that *non-governmental youth organizations* could make...

Recalling its resolution 45/103 of 14 December 1990, in which the *Secretary-General* was requested to prepare a draft world *youth programme of action* towards the year 2000 and beyond...

*Invites*, once again, *Member States* to include, whenever possible, *youth repre-*

*sentatives* in their delegations... with a view to stimulating participation of *young women and men* in the implementation of the Programme of Action...

To say that the General Assembly is a male and adult-centric space in the UN is to state the obvious. What needs to be made obvious, however, is how the youth have been symbolically 'adult-erated,' that is, made part of a global development agenda formulated by adults and continuously spoken and referred to by adults themselves. The World Programme of Action for Youth benefited from meetings, consultations and forums attended by the youth that fall in the definition-overlap. The final and official document that was eventually publicised betrays how such forums are largely ceremonial in form and substance: it was the adults in the General Assembly talking to each other about the youth. Member-states could include in their delegation a youth representative (who need not necessarily be an age-defined youth). But because an adult was talking to another adult, this option was conveyed as an 'invitation.' In practice, of course, an invitation can always be declined.

Attempts to surface the youth inevitably end up in the rhetorical question of what makes the young different, or what are their specific needs and concerns. The question is rhetorical especially when articulated within the definition-overlap of youth. Inadequacies in explaining this question tend to end up in the assertion to 'integrate the needs and concerns of the young,' an implicit admission that indeed the question is rhetorical. 'Listening to youth's voices' has become the favourite means to attaining integration. Presumably, the youth's imagination, idealism and energies could be vocalised. If so, then they must work up their vocal chords.

### The Silence of Young Women's Voices

The preparatory meeting for the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) for the Asia-Pacific Region was held in Nepal. The behind-the-scenes of meetings such as this are rarely made public, always thought to be best left behind in the back-ground. To do so would be to incur accusations of being divisive, disruptive and if one is young, of being immature and not knowing any better. This is because the discordant voices are usually articulated and left behind the scenes—they are

drowned in the synchronicity of what is generally presented to the public.

The gathering was thoroughly animated by 'adult' women and men articulate in English and equally articulate in

"It frustrates us... that when the adult world gathers to discuss sustainable communities and global well-being, young women's issues are left off the agenda and young women themselves are excluded from the process."

asserting what was on their minds. The outspoken 'adult' women appeared impressive and brimming with expertise, equally oblivious as the men to the many others who may also have something to say. The general atmosphere in this situation made Carol feel inadequate and prayed that no one would call her 'my dear child' by any one of the adult women present in the meeting. "I wanted to speak, but feared that I might say it in the wrong manner. Also, I thought I might offend the 'mature' ones, including the woman from the funding agency that sponsored the meeting."

If other young women in that meeting felt the same way as Carol, she did not detect it. "I found the level of discussions and debates repetitive, tiring and alienating. Young women simply listened with no visible reactions on their part."

According to Hudson (1994), young women's attempts to be acceptable are likely to be undermined by the widely accepted perception that they are immature. Gilligan and Brown (1992) explain that young women experience the loss of their voice because they 'fear upsetting.' In order to overcome this, young women would resort to silence or speak in a 'carefully moderated voice.'

In a separate study, Brown (1998) argues that young women eventually learn how to speak through the voices of other people, which render them 'ventriloquists.' A young woman in

this forum fits the findings of these studies: she spoke in a very mature manner (serious) and appeared like a mature woman (dressed formally and wearing cosmetics). Another spoke about how she was victimised by sexual trafficking. Her overall appearance was suggestive of femininity, weakness and vulnerability.

Attributes of being young are generally couched in feminine terms (weak, irrational, emotional, unreasonable) while adulthood is equated in masculine terms (rational, logical, expert). Indeed, in an adult-supervised forum like the WCAR, the young are subjected to diminution—of how society victimises them even while their capacity to combat it is extolled. Because they are young, what can only be demonstrated is their victimisation. Notice how Mary Robinson, former Secretary General of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, drew attention to this in her keynote address to WCAR's Youth Summit:

It is a *pleasure* for me to address you here in Durban at the closing ceremony of the Youth Summit... One of the ways in which *your work* here can be carried forward is

to make it part of the *United Nations Special Session on Children* which will take place next month in New York... The fight against racism cannot be won without the wholehearted support of young people. You are all familiar with the story of Steve Biko...here was a young man who became a symbol of resistance...and inspired millions...We can draw inspiration from many other countries too. For example, next week we will hear from someone whose experience should encourage us... Mariama Oumarou is a 17-year old girl from Niger who was sold as a slave at the age of 15. But she escaped and will be telling her story in Durban as one of the *Voices of Victims*.

To say that Robinson's speech reflects privileging of the masculine is, again, to state the obvious. What needs to be made more explicit, however, is how she had deliberately assigned the masculine to a young woman and that in order to dispel doubt about it, she flashed the photograph of a young Chilean woman to prove her point:

I saw for myself how *enthusiastic* young people are to support the *aims of the Conference*. I also saw how they can make their presence felt. It happened at the regional preparatory meeting for the Americas in Santiago de Chile last March. In the middle of the official speeches, a young Argentinian woman, Viviana Figueroa, *commandeered* the microphone from the President of Chile to express the feelings of the indigent people who were not included in the drafting process. *Here is her photo to prove it!*

Robinson created the impression that as victims, young women need only to prove it by their 'voice.' And if a situation demands that they *not* conform to the victimology model (of being helpless and suffering victims of circumstances apparently beyond their control), they would have to produce evidence of this! For further legitimacy, the experience must be described in masculine terms. The dictionary definition of *commandeer* is clear: "to seize for military use; to take as if by right." The sight of Viviana Figueroa *commandeering* the microphone from the

President of Chile was more than symbolic of the masculine.

A similar incident also happened in a workshop on sexual and reproductive rights in Bangkok in 2000. A group of young women, prompted by what they felt was their exclusion from more substantial discussions, "took control of the microphones and overtaking the podium to claim space and make their voices heard." This episode led these young women to form the Network of Asia Pacific Youth (NAPY).

In Huairou, China where the NGO Forum for the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women was held, the victimology model was also applied. A play about women's sexual trafficking was staged and performed by women survivors of sexual abuse aged 14 to 22. Despite the play's aim to raise the audiences' and the young women's consciousness about women's oppression, it was later found out that many among those who acted in that play extended their victimisation to reality. One of them became a mail-order-bride by marrying an old white European man. Several others broke ties with the non-government organisation sheltering them and went back to the streets, making themselves more vulnerable to sexual violence and

discrimination.

The 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in 1995 eventually produced the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women. The first sentence in the Declaration requires no further explanation, except to note that this document has been the subject of fierce criticisms or constant reference by women around the world.

*We, the Governments participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women.*

The same section of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) declares that "voices of all women are acknowledged" and "the hope present in the world's youth" as inspiring. The preliminary document submitted to the General Assembly made mention of "voices of young women," but this same phrase is not to be found in the final version. Presumably, their voices have all been subsumed under the over-arching category called women. Indeed, the young women have been 'adult-erated.'

The girl-child is one of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern of the BPFA for "the girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow." As the 'woman of tomorrow,' "their skills, ideas and energy are vital to the goals

of equality, development and peace.” We wonder when is this tomorrow coming? Are the young women being put in a situation where their abilities may be recognised but they are not allowed to participate anyway in spaces decidedly reserved for adult women? The section on the girl child in the BPFA might as well bear the subtitle of “Able but not Allowed: Wait for Tomorrow when You’ve Become Woman.”

Thus, it is no wonder that young women from Canadian Youth-Speak International almost did not make it to the very space that purports to speak for the voices of all women. In their words: “It frustrates us...that when the adult world gathers to discuss sustainable communities and global well-being, young women’s issues are left off the agenda and young women themselves are excluded from the process.” The group was being asked to produce evidence of financial viability, one the UN’s requirements to be able to participate in the women’s forum in Beijing.

Press statements on the participation of young women in the Review of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing + 5) appeared glowing and celebratory. Indication of how young women merely serve as echoes, one

press statement did not even bother to conceal it:

...representative group of young people gathered at the Preparatory Committee on Beijing + 5 in New York, to ensure views of young are included... Today they were the young voices *echoing* the celebration of women’s rights from 60 countries all over the world.

The statement also betrays how young women actually do not have a voice in this kind of gathering. It further reports:

During the theatre piece, the young people revealed their *bright yellow shirts* with their *logo* and handed out *flyers* in which they *state* that *young women* are key *actors* in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action...

Presumably, the young women’s echoes could be printed in flyers or shirts. The above cited press statement was released by WomenAction, which describes itself as “a global information and communication and media network that enables NGOs to actively engage in the

Beijing+5 review process.” On its website, it “generously acknowledges *financial* support” of the UN’s WomenWatch and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). With Canada’s CIDA lending financial support to WomenAction, it becomes inexplicable now why those young women from Canada Youth-Speak International nearly did not make it to the Beijing Forum.

So much has been said of young women’s voices, and of the need to hear young women’s voices. But how can these be heard when their “inner voice is interfering with their ability to speak?” (Gilligan 1993). Young women’s ability to speak is being silenced by their sense of inadequacy, inexperience and non-ability to speak in ‘adult’ language. But again, this is stating the obvious. Perhaps we should just simply stop our preoccupation with voices. To demand for a voice requires the presence of a listener. If young women’s voices are being bannered as important, who are their listeners? It is time to unplug our ears. ♪

*Lorna Israel and Carol Bello are from the Philippines. They consider themselves ‘entertainers and performers.’ Lorna’s space is the classroom in Miriam College while Carol’s is music bars and public events where music is part of the*

*programme. What’s on their mind is publicly recorded. Carol’s, on CDs, and Lorna’s, on paper, painted or printed. Officially, they are outside the UN’s definition of youth, as Filipino citizens, they are, legally, of majority age.*

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