

Beyond Age: Young Women and Diversity

By Lalaine Viado

I am always amazed at the consequence of my attempts toward self-introspection to create a portrait depicting who I am. Very likely I would discover, as has always been the case, that I become more than the singular person that emerges from a geometric white canvass or a silvery mirror bouncing off a reflection I know as me. The picture always changes in every adventure, depending on specific prisms and backdrops I view myself against, and the time I have set out to do so. I become a fully metamorphosed individual, a continuously transforming being. In an instant, the views from which to see me, and the eyes that see me, change. I am simply not a permanent portrait that captures, reflects and estimates the entirety of me.

Then again, why launch a project that appears so complicated and difficult as creating a self-portrait when I know by now that no Mona Lisa resides in that frame? I simply have seen that I am many persons rolled into one and that no roll of fabric could capture me fully. I am not only a Filipino, woman, mother, sister, daughter, Catholic, young, activist, etc., etc.—I am all of these and more. Why risk limiting my self in creating a definitive self-portrait, which is sure to happen the moment I try to? The truth of the matter is, I have to draw a select few of my identities, thus highlighting them over the other aspects of my being, to pursue a politics magnifying their

presence in society and centering the absences and diminution rendered to them in various fields.

Chronological Disorder

I was well within the regional women's movement in Asia Pacific at 25 before I became part of the Network of Asia Pacific Youth (NAPY). As I told a close friend, I became an "adult" first before I realised I was also young. In an environment of ageism and prejudice toward youth, I have so much desired to leave this "transitional stage." I was told, and have always felt it to be so, that as soon as you pass such a stage and become "older," you should be perfectly adept, whether in decision-making, in the personal

choices you make, in your chosen work, and in others. In sum, you are accorded full respect and recognition. I could not wait for that to happen. The irony is, when you get even older, another challenge sets in because as an older person, you are only as good as a decrepit force and an attenuated voice in your own environment and in society as a whole. How you then fear becoming old!

Scrutinising privileges assigned to chronological ages comes to me as problematic. One is simply too young or too old to find that rightful place one had hoped for. In the meantime, youth is presented as a "not-yet-there stage," ironically suggesting an impatience to finally hit the mark of adulthood. Youth as both a concept and practice becomes a disability to overcome.

Age As an Identity

A ramification of this painful concept of youth can be seen within the women's movement. In a sea of women in the women's movement, several young women realised the need for separate work that does not see its constituencies as one homogeneous group. The early members of NAPY challenged the constitution of this movement as primarily that of middle-aged women and decried exclusion of young women in what appears to be a

predominantly adult-only process.

In those times it became more apparent to me that age could be an organising entity with which to set into motion what could be a social action or movement. Age was perhaps an entity, whether consciously or unconsciously, that likewise organised the women's movement in the past.

Two years ago, I formally learned that the way to organise around a particular common entity is called the "politics of identity." Sunila Abeysekera describes the politics of identity as "when a particular group that defines a particular identity for itself on the basis of a feature such as sex, sexual orientation, occupation, etc. to intervene in politics... Women's politics is also an example of the politics of identity."¹ My own understanding of the politics of identity is a process of assigning power to, or the recognition of, an underprivileged identity on a par with the power given to others. It does this while rooting out the causes of disempowerment in general toward a celebration of diversities resulting in social justice and development.

A Means, Not An End

The politics of identity, however, is only a means, and not an end in itself. Or-

organisations formed on the basis of age, for instance, often settle for “youth” as their organisational premise. There are too many girls’ and young women’s associations, clubs and sororities, but the politics with which to challenge power within the larger society is simply not there. Identity-based politics leads to address power and disempowerment in the context of justice, and organisations merely skirting around age are but organisations in gestation.

While the process is never identical for social and political movements, the most vibrant organising around the politics of identity, I believe, almost always starts from the negative, that is, identities rendered as objects of oppression, exploitation, subordination and discrimination. The vibrancy of movements, I have observed, is achieved mostly from using frameworks of what is there to work against. Underprivileging on the basis of race, religion, class, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation and other categories are henceforth challenged. Whatever the rate of success of such work achieves, it should at least begin with coexistence and respect for diversity on different levels.

The specific direction of fighting systems of underprivileging and oppression should serve as the trail that sets the spirit of young women’s movements ablaze. Age may be the organising entity, but it is the

struggle against those painful experiences brought about by age and the recognition of the power to subvert such experiences in the context of social justice that demarcate youth organisations across a wide spectrum.

governments proposed to delete the word “youth” in all paragraphs of the document serving as concrete output of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) held in

deletion, by luck and lobbying, never pushed through, but yes, surely, the futures of the world are just not here at the moment.

Youth is so defined—or undefined—that it becomes largely a state of limbo, if not a problematic stage. It is not talked about in social sciences, other than in discussions on drug addiction, unwanted pregnancies, social anarchy, etc. Youth is prejudiced; it is for instance readily lumped together as a sector hooked on drugs, even though there are adults, as another social group, as much hooked. It is difficult to make sense of the declarations of school textbooks and of society in general that youth are social liabilities even as they say the youth are the future of any given country.

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Maybe Tomorrow

There has been too much raving about the power of young people on many fronts. Jose Rizal, the Philippines’ national hero, saw youth as the hope of the nation. As in most cultures, young people are regarded as the “future.” But the conferment of such value is not without a glaring contradiction of the way young people are regarded.

Especially in Asia-Pacific cultures, particularly Philippine culture, youth is a difficult stage that does not have any identity, except when juxtaposed against childhood and adulthood. An example of this is when several

Durban South Africa in September 2001. Those who took the floor reasoned that the youth are already included in either “children” or “adults” in the document.

Such denial of youth’s existence was for me incomprehensible, in light of a WCAR Youth Summit held likewise in Durban a few days before the formal sessions. After investing remarkable amounts of money to pull through a world youth summit and after a two-day euphoria about the power of youth and their stakes in the future, the WCAR process declared youth in fact non-existent. The proposal for

Young women receive the same messages within the women’s movement. They are always consigned to the future, and such utterances are often both direct and indirect. Those that are not directly articulated can be gleaned from the classification of young women as a sub-sector. The youth’s being the future is so often told in women’s gatherings, and even in personal conversations, that the statement is insulting. When I hear this, I am offended at having just heard I am not yet good enough for today. Such awful regard might have actually been “useful” as a reason for providing young women opportunities via

concrete and holistic programmes building their capacities and arming them with confidence in facing the challenges of today and the future. Only passing it off as a general comment, however, undoes all these.

The danger in these rests upon the conscious and unconscious validation of youth as an inadequate stage. It implies ineptness which, while may be true, nevertheless effectuates a command to young women to succumb to hierarchies favouring “older women” that can unbelievably turn into “authorities” deserving the subservience of others to what they consider training and mentorship initiatives. I am not against training and mentorship per se, but against the way hierarchies are so placed that justify docility and subservience as part of on-the-job training. The effect of this is best captured by Sara Longwe’s definition of PhD—pull her down—during a talk at my university years ago in reference to older women’s relationships with the younger ones within the movement. On the merit of having a PhD degree, older women gain legitimacy over pulling her down further in the guise of mentorship and training.

But Not Today

The tragedy of not yet living in your own time lies not just in the length of the wait, but also in having to carry handbags and luggage of documents for the “fully grown” women during the

“wait.” I am not sure of the other regions, but from this side of the globe, come to any women’s conference, whether in Bangkok or New York, and you will see the young women from women’s organisations heavily burdened, not by the predicaments of the future, but by tons of documents on women’s rights for shipping back

complaints, not wanting to sit in the middle, stay silent and act properly, make tea, and call those not yet in. On top of this, she has to struggle against impatience for the future to happen. And these all happen near the UN headquarters in New York, in the midst of the struggle for the mainstreaming of women’s rights and liberation.

The challenge of diversity indeed lies in celebrating diversity itself—among women, between the old and the young, between the young and the young, and other relationships—toward equality and social justice.

home to be arranged in the shelves when these young women return. Young women dominate the logistics of the women’s movement, but they remain in the margins of the very logic that established the movement—the empowerment of all women.

I remember a young member of NAPY who dreads meetings with groups of older women in her own country. She is the centre of attraction, however, and only because she has to take minutes, and everyone checks out with her as they speak. Her presence is marked at the centre of a circle, but the decisions are made elsewhere. She

Even within the dynamics of youth, young women are at many points facing tensions with their male youth counterpart due to sexism and other things. That they also face female-female dynamics structured not just by generation gaps but also by differences in class, educational background, skin colour and caste, makes it therefore doubly sad. Although inter-generational issues are always presented as the main feature of female-female relationships, these other factors cannot be discounted as outside female-female dynamics.

In some instances, the antagonism between the

conflicting interests of the young and the old boil over. Shamillah Wilson recognised that a generational gap exists for many reasons, two of them being the fear of young women that older women “won’t see beyond [their] youth and dismiss [their] efforts” and the fear of older women “that [the youth’s] new visions, methods and energy will nullify [their] contributions and make [them] redundant as we take the movement into the future.”² I agree to Wilson’s invitation of coexistence with respect for differences because these differences do shape the women’s movement and the overall fight for social justice.

The worst that could happen is when the two “sub-sectors” are pitted against each other, and they lose sight of the very basis of a women’s movement. Territorialism is sometimes employed to bridge antagonism, thus the belief that young women are the future and the older are the present. But territorialism is as reprehensible as sexism. It separates young women from older women, as much as sexism excludes women.

Not The Same Either

Heeding the call for a more liberating relationship among women, however, is not just a matter of accommodation. It pertains to inclusiveness that goes beyond ensuring a proportionate number of young women in the decision-making structures of the women’s movement or any

other movement. Beyond the representative numbers and agency bodies for young women is the conscious acceptance of the diversities that characterise young women. This is inclusiveness in the finest sense, taking into account *all* young women, but most especially those most underprivileged because young women cannot be lumped as a homogeneous group. Age is but a mere organisational entity, it is not synonymous with homogeneity.

As with the older ones, young women are never one and the same. The differences among them are evident, even just in the exterior, for example, clothing. A young Bangladeshi woman may share the same sari with an immigrant counterpart in the UK, but it may only be just this they share, besides their age. Saris, too, are varied, in the fabrics used, the shapes, even the way they are worn by young South Asian women. The physical features of South-east Asians, may be similar, but not their concerns. I am always mistaken for an Indonesian or Thai or Malaysian, but I suggest you would know I'm a Filipino or who is one when we open our mouths and move that mother tongue.

Young women across the globe are also worlds apart. We may share solidarity regarding several issues, especially those raised by non-government organisations, but our capabilities and capacities define a totally different landscape for networking

and solidarity. Many young women may convey the same messages in chatrooms or by cellular-phone texting, but the infrastructure for such "relating" varies. The young women from North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asian-Pacific are so varied in the kind of worlds they live in. I never did think there was just only one world.

The challenge of diversity indeed lies in celebrating diversity itself—among women, between the old and the young, between the young and the young, and other relationships—toward equality and social justice. Here also lies the challenge of reconstructing a movement that does not defer young women and consider issues and concerns of young women, especially those from the most vulnerable sectors, and does not leave anyone in queue. The same challenge is true for present youth and young women's organisations.

"Prologue"

Feminism is not dead—unless it stops at confronting patriarchy only. The task of demolishing an ideology centred on the primacy of the penis, with its permutations in this modern, technological generation, is already tall, but feminism may soon be acquiring the impotence it assigns its enemy by just being too focused on it.

Feminism must confront power, and all the ramifications of power working against all women. It must isolate the different

manifestations of women's oppression on numerous fronts because women are not one and the same, and neither are the kinds of power that oppress them. Feminism must confront the many facets of women's lives and the acceptance of new strategies that empower all and oppress no one, even within its ranks. Feminism is about challenging the world out there to follow in its examples that leave no one in oblivion and instead situates everyone at the core of development and social justice. If young women cannot expect this from the home front, what is there to expect from the world out there? If the theory and practice of justice is failing on the home front, isn't it time to clean up our backyard? Empowerment and justice, after all, are both a means and an end. Within our ranks and in the larger context of societies, the triumph of achieving our goals is in seeing this happen. ☺

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Sunila Abeysekera, a Sri Lankan, was one of the lead facilitators for the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) Lobby Training Workshop entitled "The Intersectionality of Race and Gender in the Asia Pacific." The author served as documentor of the proceedings of the workshop, which was held in Chiangmai, Thailand on 24-26 January 2001.
- ² Shamillah Wilson is a young woman from South Africa and currently the manager of Young Women and Leadership Programme of the Association for Women's Human Rights in Development (AWID). She is also the best pal for endless coffee sessions and savory conversations on how it is to be a young woman from the South.