Movement-building challenges for young women in southern Africa

By Shamillah Wilson

Women’s movements in all parts of the world are currently engaged in addressing issues of power. In southern Africa, women’s movements have been through several shifts in recent decades, including participating in liberation struggles; engaging with states to hold post ‘flag-democracy’ states accountable to ideals of ‘gender equality’; interacting with the North and engaging in diverse initiatives concerned with women’s human rights; and engaging with local and continental struggles to understand the links between sexualities, gender, and socio-economic space – all of which are vigorous, nuanced, and valuable.¹

Currently though, in the region, of great concern is the dwindling vibrancy of the women’s movements both nationally and regionally – a situation which has been correctly attributed to a range of factors, including a diminishing resource base, limited capacity and ability to effectively mobilise and organise around new challenges such as HIV and AIDS, among other issues. Other key challenges for women’s movement building include the ‘NGO-ization’ of movements, which has resulted in sectoral, erratic and often scattered engagement of feminist voices in the public domain. The ongoing assaults on women’s bodies, lives and activism has in many ways also burnt out many activists, groups and in some cases initiatives.²

One startling reason is an obvious and apparent lack of connection between many initiatives and the participation of poor grassroots and young women in organising actions for transformation. The challenge for women’s groups is to ensure the revival of movements that are visible, strong and diverse enough to result in concrete and sustainable change.
It is important to note though that since before the Beijing Conference in 1995, feminist movements across the globe have increasingly made efforts to include young women in a range of spaces and initiatives. At the same time, young women themselves have started their own initiatives and organised themselves. These efforts have sometimes been effective and at other times have simply remained on the margins of broader social movements. Over the last 15 years though, the discourse around young feminist activism has also shifted from merely trying to involve young women because of their youth, to engaging them because they have something unique to offer in terms of their analysis and strategies. Importantly, there are also many more young women who come to activism through the universities and educational institutions signalling a very different entry point from previous generations. In southern Africa, increasingly as grassroot women have started mobilising around key issues related to their basic needs such as HIV and violence, women's movements themselves have indicated that there is a need for broad-based movements that effectively engage and work with young and other marginalised groups of women.

Why broad-based movements?

Our moment in time is defined by increasing gaps between the world’s wealthy and its poor—and the impact that has on societies in terms of accessing basic human needs, let alone rights. It is no secret that globally, women of every generation are now experiencing increasing levels of violence, corruption, discrimination, terrorism, war, poverty, sexism, impacts of new technologies, threats of environmental degradation, etc. The current global situation can either be an opportunity for or threat to young women, especially those with fewer choices, as these challenges determine their opportunities and their ability to claim their basic human rights.

In southern Africa, despite increased opportunities, young women have still not managed to free themselves from discriminatory norms and practices entrenched through tradition, customs, religion and culture. At the same time, it is important to point out that issues such as location, class, citizenship, race, education, HIV status, age and sexuality all result in women experiencing power differently. Whilst the struggles of previous generations have resulted in more opportunities and benefits for this generation of young women, there is also the need to consciously seek innovative strategies to ensure access (rights) to the benefits and gains (education, opportunities, etc) for those who lack formal education, do not have the communication technologies, and are engaged with the day-to-day struggles of survival. For all this to happen, there is need for clear strategies for broad-based movements that allow space and participation by diverse groups of women in the struggle for equality and equity.

The level of engagement of young women in movements says a lot about the movement’s longevity, reach, health and sustainability. Within southern Africa, at the different national levels, there are different initiatives attempting to engage young women, bringing them into the fold of activism and organising, from a feminist ideological frame. At the regional level, there are issue specific networks that young women connect to, but not necessarily a young feminist initiative that connects young feminists across the region. The Open Society Initiative for Southern African’s (OSISA) Young Women Voices initiative, still in its infancy, could grow to be a much needed regional initiative. Otherwise, efforts to nurture young feminist activism still leave a lot to be desired, as in many cases they are piecemeal and lack the backing of key groups within national movements – possibly due to other competing agendas.

The arguments for scaling-up efforts to engage young women in women’s movements include the fact that young women are (once capacitated and supported) best placed to give voice, visibility and organisation to issues confronting young women. In addition, the participation of women and girls of all ages is critical to the future of the women’s movements and the fight for social justice. The involvement of young women is certainly a key strategy to expand movements and to energise them both for the present as well as for the future. That said – it does present particular challenges for multigenerational organising and collaboration.

Young women and movement building: the challenges Which young women?

Young women are by no means a homogenous grouping within society and this in itself is a huge challenge for movement building. As noted by Mudaliar and Malek, ‘young women’s identity’ has been critical for building a supportive community among young activists, at the same time it has alienated women of other generations, as well as led to a glossing over of very real difference among young women.

The reality is that on the one hand, we have a group of young women (mostly urban) who have been through some form of higher education and who, when they get into feminist spaces, are in most cases open to exploring and engaging in movement building. Added to this is the fact that some of those young women who are privileged enough to move across the global and regional stage of engagement with women’s movements have the challenging task of transcending boundaries (whether it is national/regional, north/south). Connecting these engagements to the national context is important, yet many of these young women struggle to find space to do so. On the other hand, the reality of many young women who lack this higher and formal education is very different. They struggle more than their educated counterparts to find space in feminist movements. They
rights and bodily integrity are some of the key issues that young women struggle to reconcile with their faith. Often young women who openly identify with feminism also become targets of ostracisation and marginalisation and sometimes even violence. All of these need to be taken into account in strategies to engage young women as the need for belonging and social connections should not be underestimated.

Power sharing and multi-generational tensions

The call for multi-generational organisations and movements now seems to be quite dated, as illustrated in Nyaradzai Gumbodzvanda’s article, elsewhere in this Issue. Yet, whilst a basic tenet of feminism is to deconstruct power and propose alternative paradigms for power sharing, in reality – within feminist movements – the engagement with issues of power and with redefining participatory engagement leaves a lot to be desired. The women’s movement in southern Africa is no different from its sister movements in other regions. Issues of rural, lesbian, transgender, HIV positive, disabled, young women, etc. continue to cause confusion and often conflicts. The fact that social movements often mirror the complex relationships of power that they seek to transform does nothing to alleviate the divisions and damage caused by how different identities are included or excluded. Hence, the continued appeal for the feminist movement to honestly and boldly tackling issues of power and leadership within the movement itself.

We have heard the voices of different generations of feminists talking about the “generation gap within the women’s movement, and a marked absence of younger women in leadership positions”. Many feminists have eloquently argued that the feminist movement needs to become truly multi-generational. Alpizar and Wilson argue that it is important for the movement(s) to encourage young women’s participation in order to:

(i) allow the movement(s) to reinvent itself;
(ii) ensure consistency with the principles and values of feminism – and as we are challenging power and privilege – it is important that we also do so amongst ourselves; and
(iii) build strength and sustainability.

A committed engagement with these issues will provide the foundation for developing intra-generational solidarity and power.
It is also important to point out that a multi-generational movement includes a role for the ‘doyennes’ of the women’s movement, who still have a key role to play in mentoring and ensuring that institutional memory is effectively transferred. Also, open debates need to happen about changing roles and the lifecycle of activism, which I think we have never really had within the movement.

Our movements certainly need this injection of new energies and ways of working. Whilst recognising the wisdom of those who had been involved for longer, it is important to acknowledge the ‘experiences’ of this generation of feminism, which can also add to our pot of wisdom in the movement. Over the last decade, in many spaces globally and in the region, the inter-generational dialogues have been a strategic entry point for starting this process. In southern Africa, though, there is possibly room to have more of these at the national level and also sub-regional level. However, it should not stop there as movements are really good at talking and dialoguing, yet, they are not good at translating these talks into real meaning and action. One way could possibly be to define some forms of indicators that could guide and assess how the movement is doing in this area, and to have regular updates and reflections on how to get better at multi-generational forums.

**New forms of activism**

Another challenge is that young women who come into activism enter through the NGO system and many of them become boxed-in by the strategies and methods of mobilising and organising within these contexts. Inherently, because of their relative freshness in the area of activism, the focus should not only be on getting young women to understand the issues but to enable them to come up with different ways of ‘doing activism’. For instance, the fact that young women are part of an era where almost every young person has access to a cell phone, provides a great opportunity for younger feminists to take what has already been done and initiated by previous generations of feminists and build on it with their understanding of the issues, with their possibilities and their resources for creating change. Alpizar and Wilson add to this analysis by saying that “by using a more flexible definition of activism and exploring new ways of engagement, younger generations can help create the creativity and momentum to move forward.” For women’s movements this is an opportunity to effectively engage the types of energies and possible innovations that young people can bring to shift power.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a need to guard against such actions and initiatives being labelled as ‘youth focused initiatives’ and not being integrated into broader strategies and agendas. It is important to be mindful of this, as many of the initiatives led by young feminists have not always enjoyed the participation and the backing of other generations so young feminists have often experienced a sense of marginalisation of their issues and their activism.

**Opportunities for young women and movement building**

There are many opportunities for movement building involving young women, including increasing access to technology (e.g. cell phones) and social networks and increasing awareness and engagement around feminism among young women within the sub-region. The fact that there are increasing initiatives geared towards increasing these numbers is a definite opportunity that needs to be leveraged. One of the key learnings from institutions has been that more and more young women are attending feminist political education initiatives. Yet, the challenge is to build on these so that they do not remain once-off events but that it builds a community of activists that continue engaging, being nurtured and mentored to ultimately take collective action. That is the true indicator of effective movement building.

One of the key strategies available to connect young women is to leverage technology so that it creates a platform to connect, provide support for and facilitate ongoing dialogue between young women activists. This would fulfil the purpose of linking young feminist activists in different countries and also sharing information and strategies specific to the region. Setting this up is not a cumbersome or costly task, as the range of open-source software allows and facilitates such platforms. In addition, the existence of groups such as the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Africa and Women’s Net also ensure that there is a means for young women to gain support for this. However, the biggest challenge is often keeping something like this going since it would depend on the energies and commitment of young women to drive it so that it ultimately results in a pulse that could become vibrant with young feminist voices and actions. For this, young women could define how they want to do it but also request the necessary support and mentorship from the range of institutions in the sub-region.

This would also allow young feminists within southern Africa to profile their efforts, experiences and analysis and ensure that this addresses the current gap in voices from the sub-region. Similarly, this could also be a means for young feminists to come up with and design alternative strategies and forms of activism and increase the critical mass of young women activists from all levels of society. Young women would also be able to – through such initiatives – work closely with institutions to engage in ongoing dialogue around multi-generational forums, facilitation of mentoring as well as to monitor the effectiveness of such initiatives.
Conclusion

Movement-building as a discourse is in some ways a relatively new approach to push women’s movements to connect the importance of mobilising important constituencies with a clear political agenda and working with these constituencies to choose targets, strategies and actions that would bring about social justice. The case for movement building with young women has already been made and what is needed is proactive coordinated action by a range of key actors as well as young women themselves. This cannot be a passing phase but needs a concerted, dedicated approach that integrates it into the core strategies and agendas of women’s movements. It will require both the resources and energies necessary to ensure that over a dedicated period of time, the movement reflects the demographics of the actual society in which it is organising. This will ultimately enable the collective (young and old) to co-create new ways of risk-taking to tackle the ever-changing face of patriarchy confronting us.

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Endnotes

10. AWID Spotlight, 2005: Making Waves: How young women can (and are) transforming organisations and movements