The challenges of young women in movement building in Southern Africa

Shamillah Wilson

Introduction

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 to young women or a threat with fewer choices to some as these challenges shape 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 surviving.

Currently, women’s movements in all parts of the world are engaged in addressing issues of power. In addition, women’s movements in Southern Africa have been through several shifts in recent decades including participation in liberation struggles; engagement with state to hold post ‘flag-democracy’ states accountable to ideals of “gender equality”; interaction between the North and diverse initiatives concerned with “women’s human rights; and engagement with local and continental struggles to understand the links between sexualities, gender, and socio-economic space is vigorous, nuanced, and valuable.

At the current moment though, in the region, of great concern is the dwindling vibrancy of the women’s movement nationally and regionally which can be 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. Some of the key challenges for women’s movement building is that the NGO’ization of movements have 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. The other startling reality is that there is an obvious lack of connection between many initiatives and the participation of poor grassroots women in organising and 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.

Where do young women fit into the picture? Since just before the Beijing Conference in 1995, increasingly feminist movements across globe have 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 grassroots 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 to more effectively engage and work with young women.\textsuperscript{v}

That being said, the level of engagement of young women in movements says a lot about the movements longevity, reach, health and sustainability.\textsuperscript{vi} Within Southern Africa, at the different national levels there are different initiatives attempting to engage young women, bring them into the fold of activism and organising from a feminist ideological frame. At the regional level, there are likely issue specific networks that young women connect to, but not necessarily a young feminist initiative that connects young feminist across the region. Efforts to nurture young feminist activism still leaves a lot to be desired as in many cases they are piece-meal and lacks the backing of key groups within national movements; possibly due to the 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 organised on issues confronting young women. In addition, the participation of women and girls of all ages is critical to the future of the women’s movement 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 moment as well as for the future. That said, it does present particular challenges of multi-generational organising and collaboration and focused attention to the challenges inherent in movement building with young women.

**Challenges for young women and movement building in Southern Africa**

(i)

Which young women

As mentioned earlier in this paper, young women are by no means a homogenous grouping within society. 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.\textsuperscript{vii}

The reality is that on the one hand, we have a group of young women (mostly urban) who have been through some form of further education and who when they get into feminist spaces in most cases are 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, many young women who lack formal education do not have access to communication technologies and are engaged with the day-to-day struggles of survival. Women’s movements in general have struggled to effectively organise women (let alone young women!) from impoverished contexts due to a lack of resources and often lack of foresight as to how sustained political education and mobilisation could ultimately result in some of the power shifts sought. This is a critical area for young women who join movements to tackle and a key task will be to ensure that feminist political education and mobilisation is accessible and appealing and results in strategies that are led by women in these contexts.
(ii) Feminist or not?

Women’s movements have increasingly recognised that in order to transform power and to eradicate all forms of discrimination and oppressions, feminism as an ideology and social strategy is a political alternative for achieving this. As we are living in a time where feminism continues to evoke strong responses and backlash, for many young women the misconceptions have meant that many would not openly identify with the feminist movement. Some young women feel that by labelling their activism as feminist, it firstly leaves out parts of their community and too often asks them to leave out certain groups in their community without challenging them to be leaders and/or advocates in their community. Other young women openly choose the identity as they feel that it is a way to start subverting the restrictions and impositions of socialisation on women.

The challenge for movement building with young women in relation to this is that there needs to be opportunities for young women to define what their feminism means to them at this particular point in time. On another level, as they seek to take action and build alliances of solidarity, it should allow them to forge these as needed with other young women who are willing to buy into their political agenda, but who for various reasons may not choose to name themselves as feminist. Whilst the emphasis should be to build political solidarity, it is imperative to create spaces for young women to enter into the movement based on their exposure to how the ideology and social change strategy actually impacts on the lives of women.

The impact of conservative agendas, especially through evangelical Christian fundamentalism in Southern Africa, is a further challenge. Many young women who identify with a particular religion, often find the conflicts in identifying with feminism. Issues such as women’s rights and bodily integrity are some of the key issues that young women struggle to reconcile with their faith. For young women who openly identify with feminism also become targets of ostracisation and marginalisation and sometimes violence. All of these needs to be taken into account in strategies to engage young women as the need for belonging and social connections should not be underestimated.

(iii) Power sharing and multi-generational tensions

The call for multi-generational organising and movements by now seems to be quite dated. Yet, whilst a basic tenet of feminism is to deconstruct power, propose alternative paradigms for power sharing, in reality, within feminist movements, the engagement with issues of power and to redefine participatory engagement, leaves a lot to be desired. The women’s movement in the Southern African region is no different from her sister movements in other regions. Issues of rural, lesbian, transgender, HIV positive, disabled, young women etc. continue to cause contradictions 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 tackle issues of power and leadership. 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 before have eloquently argued that the feminist movement needs to become truly multi-generational. Alpizar and Wilson argue the importance of the movement(s) in encouraging young women’s participation in order to: (i) to allow the movements to reinvent itself; (ii) 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; (iii) building 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 can play a key role in mentoring and ensuring that institutional memory is effectively transferred. But also talks about changing roles and lifecycle of activism which I think we have never really tackled 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 as 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 into 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. But, it should not stop there as movements are really good at talking and dialogue but not as good at translating that to have real meaning and impact. One way could possibly be to define some forms of indicators that could guide and assessment of how the movement is doing in this area and to have regular updates and reflections on how to get better at multi-generational organising.

(iv) 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. 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’. 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 to 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 adds to this analysis by saying that “by using 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, hence young feminists have often experienced a sense of marginalisation of their issues and activism.

Opportunities for young women and movement building

There are many opportunities for movement building with young women, including increasing access to technology (e.g. cell-phones) 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 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.
Some of the key strategies available to connect young women is to leverage technology such that it creates a platform to connect, provide support and facilitate ongoing dialogue to young women activists. This would fulfil the purpose of linking young feminist activists in the different countries and also sharing information and strategies specific to the region. Setting up this is not a cumbersome task nor costly 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’sNet also ensure that there is a means for young women to gain support for this. However, the biggest challenge often in keeping something like this going is that it would depend on the energies, commitment of young women to drive this 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 to help get this going through whatever means possible.

The above would also allow for young feminists within Southern Africa to profile their efforts, experiences and analysis and ensure that it address the current gap of 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 from all levels of society. Young women would also be able to through such initiatives be able to work closely with institutions to engage in ongoing dialogue around multi-generational organising, facilitation of mentoring as well as to monitor the effectiveness of such initiatives.

Conclusion

Movement building as a discourse in some ways is a relatively new approach to push women’s movements to connect to the importance of mobilizing important constituencies with a clear political agenda and working with this constituency 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.

Shamillah Wilson is South African feminist engaged in various movement building efforts, including with young feminists in Africa.

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