Shamillah: Identity is a fluid notion, prioritized at different points in time, and always shifting based on personal (self and collective), historical and geo-political moments and times. To start off this conversation, I want each of you to share how you have been forced to or felt compelled to choose or prioritize particular parts of your identity?

Youmna: As a young Arab woman living in the United States (US), my identity is multiple. Constrained by the limiting U.S.-based notions of Arab identity, I have moved through various categories, but have always had to name my self in reaction to assumptions. In the gaze of the mainstream, as an Arab women I am oppressed, as an Arab I am inherently violent, and as an immigrant, I am suspicious. Most recently, if I am young and Arab, I am dangerous. I feel that until notions of identity are no longer built from ashes of global colonial, military and economic agendas, young people will consistently lose their languages and I will keep on giving geography and history lessons every time I say my name.

Nyambura: When I first decided to study development issues in University it was from the point that I was living in one of the poorest countries in the world, yet I was a middle class young woman with the ability/opportunity to go to University. After 3 years of living in Canada I found my identity had changed…and become more focused on women’s rights issues. I came home questioning why women were being stripped for dressing a certain way, or why they were being beaten to death by their spouses and the state would not say anything. I identified with the women activists who championed women’s rights as human rights. I also found that the realities of working in the women’s rights and human rights environment….balancing between activism, program development, organizational growth….led to a dramatic change in MY identity and eventually activism.

Anasuya: For me, living in India as I do, a relatively privileged young woman within my own country – urban, middle-class, English-educated – and working in general with poorer women and vulnerable peoples, both urban and rural, is a set of confusions in themselves. Add to that melange, the fact that I have lived and studied in the United Kingdom for five years, and work with international networks, and you have a confused young Indian confronting issues of inter/nationality, race, racism, colonialism, gender, class, caste, religion, region, sexuality… often all at once. And yet, do I always see myself as confused? Or are there those rare, wonderful, breathtaking joyous moments when I see myself as deeply honoured to be ‘fused’? I feel as though I am constantly trying to balance on the tightrope of multiple identities, and this can sometimes be exhilarating, and sometimes, terrifying. And sometimes I am tired of worrying about it self-consciously, and want to take a break from the words ‘multiplicity’, ‘intersectionality’ and whatever else they’re calling it these days, and live a common, garden-variety, ordinary life. Seriously, however, I think that it is impossible to work in any social justice
movement without understanding how identity politics affects us personally, and how it affects us institutionally. Ultimately, change is both individual and structural – and yet we compartmentalise even our own struggles: ‘are you a woman working on land redistribution? Or are you a land rights activist focussing on women?’ Do we seriously make these distinctions in our own heads? Or are they too often, made for us? And most important, how does this affect the way we strategise our movements?

Shamillah: What about identifying politically as a young woman?

Nyambura: The explicit and implicit ageism not only in organizations but in the women’s movement for me mirrors that of mainstream society. The question I had to ask myself was, whether to see myself as a young woman activist or as a woman activist. I chose the former, at a time when some of my colleagues chose to not question ageism, hoping nobody would notice they were young and basically be knowing or unknowing colluders in their own discrimination. It felt right though to acknowledge my identity of ‘young woman’ and deal with the arising issues.

Anasuya: Strangely enough, it has been the use of my identity as a ‘young woman’ that I have most often had to question within myself – is there a special significance to this youth that I should claim? Can I represent ‘young women’ with integrity when my overwhelming commitment is to social justice on a larger scale? I can say with clarity that when I work with the poor, I do have an unconscious focus on women, but when I work with women, do I automatically advocate for issues as a ‘young woman’? I am not sure, I have not yet resolved this for myself. What I have learnt is that we both consciously and sub-consciously prioritise certain identities for ourselves in certain contexts – we negotiate simultaneously our multiple identities as well as our complicated circumstances. This is most times for me a political choice – but sometimes it can be deeply, emotionally, cultural.

Youmna: I feel like I am constantly trying to maintain a “whole” version of myself in the ways that I define identity. It has often been the case in trainings, collaborations, group work or organizing that an individual is either expected to “represent” a portion/percentage of themselves- i.e: I am Arab, I am young , I am a woman, etc…or that because you “are that” then you “represent” the entire community/race/gender/age group etc….

Shamillah: How has your personal reflective process and understanding of your identity impacted on the ways that you organize?

Nyambura: The identity I took on in the course of my early experiences in the women’s movement became a personal identity. I identified as a young Kenyan woman activist and related to issues in society from that view point. I have integrated this into the way I organize around my ‘private/personal’ activism. Today my identity is strongly feminist, a natural development from my early years in the women’s movement in Kenya. My feminist identity has made me seek the company and support of a diverse group of other young women feminists. In terms of age, ethnicity, nationality, profession, marital status, religion….we are from different backgrounds, but what we have in common is our need for support in how we carry out our feminist activism.
**Youmna:** I have realized the importance of verbalizing/naming my identity. It has taught me to make room in all the work that I do- as a facilitator, educator, etc. for the participants, my co-workers to name identity for themselves- rather than ask them to fit into a particular box/category.

**Anasuya:** I also think it is critical that we understand the way our identities affect our relationships and the ways we organise our struggles. Issues of ageism, sexism, racism (and other forms of discrimination) might be addressed in some of our organisations, but not in all; in addition, it is sometimes superficially done, and not structurally, and finally, it can be structural, and yet not influence individual deep-seated attitudes. There are social rights activists who abuse their domestic help, feminists who disrespect younger women… we all know these are difficult areas to confront, but we need to do so. Even more critical is how we work with identity politics in our larger political worlds, and how we straddle the personal and the public with integrity.

**Shamillah:** Some of you have mentioned ‘feminism’ in your responses thus far. The first question is do you feel that you have to choose the label of feminist and how does that fit into your conceptualization of labels in general?

**Youmna:** I do feel that at this moment in time in history, the terminology of feminism does not apply to my experience and often due to race, class and gender gaps with consistent visions/versions of feminism it forces me to leave out parts of my community- it too often asks me to prioritise the needs of women and girls- without challenging me/us to be leaders and advocates for the entirety of our communities.

**Nyambura:** At this point in my life and career I feel I want to choose the label ‘feminist’. It denotes what I stand for in my life, activism, career at this time. It is also my way of challenging the notion that this label is for ‘bad, single…’ women especially in Kenya where there’s a rising backlash toward anything pro-women. I think of labels as fluid, changing with one’s identity and circumstances in a given time. They are not necessarily bad or restrictive depending on why one chooses to adorn them.

**Anasuya:** I am known as a feminist at my workplace, I often speak at conferences as a ‘young woman’ and yet these identities seem to get submerged when I am out on the streets as a peace activist. I also feel that labels can be consciously given, and consciously worn; when they’re unconsciously given and worn, they become stereotypes – and that’s what we need to work against. If a political choice, like the word ‘feminist’ for me in the middle of a group of patriarchal, hostile people, then it has a certain value. Its negativity or positivity depends on my actions and how they are interpreted by this group. I have learnt to live with my labels more and more comfortably (and ‘feminist’, particularly, needs passion as well as resilience, along with a huge dollop of cheerfulness). But it would be a problem if labels defined me, rather than that I chose them.

**Shamillah:** How would you suggest we then translate labels (in this case feminisms) into actions, ways of living, values and consciousness?
Anasuya: We can do this by moving beyond the labels to the actions – then others choose to define us by what we do, than that we justify what we do by how we call ourselves… We should also be integrating our personal and our public lives – by walking the talk – by taking out on the streets, the workplace, the electoral booth, our personal convictions – but just as much by bringing home our activism, by living our most intimate relationships with the same standards of honesty and justice that we expect of others.

Nyambura: I believe labels can help you organize and direct one’s activism toward a certain conclusion. For example in choosing to wear the feminist young woman label, I have developed and continue to develop values that I practice in my life. This in turn enables me to take the activism to my personal/private life and to take my work on young women’s rights further by exploring the issues from a feminist lens, challenging power dynamics in a way that a ‘gender’ lens does not.

Youmna: Values for me are derived from a sense of self that looks at the individual and collective possibilities of self-determination. I do not believe that they should be translated into labels, instead we should be working and dialoguing towards a renewed sense of what is sacred and rooted in a holistic, mindful way of living and working.

Shamillah: You have all mentioned your privilege and access relative to most young women, how do you suggest we negotiate privilege in the movement?

Youmna: I feel that privilege is negotiated in every aspect of one’s life, not just as part of a woman’s/feminist movement- it is an essential aspect of living and working in the age of Globalization. It is the moment when we recognize the fluidity and fragility of our identities.

Anasuya: For me, to negotiate privilege, is about being conscious, and sensitive, and responsive, but not self-conscious, and awkward and guilty. Treating all people with dignity and respect moves beyond labels, beyond identity compartments, beyond privilege.

Nyambura: I would add that for me negotiating privilege is about recognizing privilege that arises from one’s ethnicity, class, access to economic means etc. is necessary in order to define how we engage with the issues we are working on in the movement. My access to education is a privilege in Kenya, but can also be a liability in working towards women’s rights. I expose myself to criticism of not representing the ‘real’ women of Kenya whenever I stand up and speak out about women’s rights issues. Yet my education is what has enabled me to access the space and knowledge to articulate women’s needs. My advantage however does not prevent me from being violated, in a similar way to my fellow sisters. It does however remove me from certain situations where other types of violations could occur say for example Female Genital Mutilation. Negotiating privilege therefore is not to excuse that status, but to use it responsibly and acknowledge its usefulness in terms of ensuring rights for all women.

Shamillah: At this moment in time, young women’s voices have been compartmentalized into programs, caucuses and “important discussions”. How do you
think we can promote activism and leadership among young women and move beyond the soundbite—the “sexy” topic, the “the future generation”)?

Younma: I feel like that happens inherently when the work is grounded in local/small/focused area, when we are aware of the world and our links to global movements and moments but attempting to create change by staying grounded.

Nyambura: We should guard against colluding in making young women and leadership the ‘next’ sexy topic or area of work. Working within ‘traditional’ organizations in the movement and outside (donor agencies, policy institutes, government etc.) to provide the ‘other’ voice. By encouraging institutions in which we carry out our activism, to open up dialogue on how they can work with the ‘new generation’.

Anasuya: We can do this through our actions. Too many ‘older’ or senior activists feel that we are overly conscious of our age, that we complain about obstacles that they would have, in the good old days, cheerfully have forded… there’s some truth in that, that we do need to show our politics, our integrity of commitment, in the ways we work. On the other hand, people also need to recognise that politics has new ways of living in us – and we have to find new ways of coping with our worlds. The good old days are not the good new days, and the good new days are sometimes bad.

Shamillah: In the globalized era of UN meetings, conferences, and widespread institutionalization of NGO’s and Foundations, there has been a gap created between those who have “access” and those who do not. While acknowledging the work that has gone into building this access, how do we start strategizing and mobilizing for social justice within this framework?

Nyambura: We should maintain a clear link between organizational development/institution building and activism. By striking a balance that recognizes that activism is necessary but can be strengthened by working within institutions and bodies such as multi lateral bodies (WB, IMF and UN agencies) where decisions are made. We should ensure that institution building is done in a manner that constantly examines issues of who has access to the ‘right’ terminology, knowledge etc. to participate, engage or challenge it.

Younma: We should also maintain the core values and drive that lend to the needs and momentum of movements. In our strategies, we should be able to challenge the root causes of institutionalization and look at why it emerged in the first place. Through engaging (whether it is resist or reform), we should be committed in word and deed to always stay accountable to the communities we work with.

Anausya: It is important for us to constantly ask questions of the institutions. In other words, once we have policies and instruments in place, we should use it to ensure accountability.

Shamillah: In your experience, how have the forms and ways of leadership changed (in terms of consciousness and accountability), and could you elaborate on some new ways, ideas that you’ve both seen and would like to see implemented?
**Nyambura:** Leadership among younger women for example is questioning age-old notions that to be a leader one must lead. Instead these women are saying leadership is about sharing, nurturing, decisiveness, innovative, acknowledging multiple identities of the leader and those who have chosen to be led. My involvement in the Advisory Group for AWID’s YWL program is a good example of leadership that is supportive, without losing sight of the need to provide direction as the need arose. The leadership of the program manager for instance during the AWID 2002 Forum allowed/supported each of the group’s members to use their talents and at the same time she provided direction when our ideas were not very clear.

**Youmna:** I feel like the leadership models for and by young people have been most successful when they engage at every level of an organization/movement- I also feel like renewed emphasis on cultural and collective rights has shifted the models of leadership towards a more holistic framework…as has a renewed analysis of rights that rejects separating and dissecting the lives of individual and communities as “issue-areas”

**Youmna Chlala, Anasuya Sengupta, Nyambura Ngugi and Shamillah Wilson were all members of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development’s Young Women and Leadership Program Advisory Group from 2001-2003.**