

Youth contribution

Reflections of a young feminist navigating the promise of sustainable development by world leaders

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Leaders of the many global development agendas have long recognised the power and capacities of young people to lead positive social transformations. Global declarations were signed, International Youth Year and International Youth Day celebrated, funds committed to support and forefront young feminist action – and more. Yet, when I speak with other young leaders, anxiety and burnout are evident. The gap between the ever-evolving promises and its real-time impact on young people remains unimaginably vast.

What do these global promises mean for young leaders striving to change their communities for the better, all the while negotiating their own agency and balancing personal aspirations, survival needs, generational responsibilities and societal expectations?

Being raised in a low-income family and neighbourhood where all the adults were migrants, the issues of class, caste and gender became clear for me very early on in life. Getting a well-paying job seemed the only way to have a better future. So, choosing a career in social development, given my

background, in a place where societal understanding considers social work as ‘a hobby’ someone does out of their ‘good nature’ rather than as a ‘serious career’ came with its unique challenges, on top of the ones that are prevalent in the sector.

THERE IS NO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

The whole concept of sustainable development is rooted in balancing the needs of the current and future generations in a way that protects the planet and enhances people’s quality of life, particularly the most marginalised people. Discussing our collective futures without young people around the table is a missed opportunity. Although we have witnessed a quantitative increase in youth engagement opportunities, these rarely provide access to decision-making power. With our voices too often trivialised for being ‘too young’ and our ideas considered ‘too bold’, the resistance towards full integration of youth voices in decision-making is evident. Unless the programmes, interventions and funds provided for sustainable development are designed, implemented and evaluated with us, transformation cannot be accelerated. The recent experience of the Generation Equality Forum¹ shows that creating more spaces for young people to influence global development agendas is a step in the right direction. Through the Youth Task Force, Action Coalitions, Adolescent Girls Steering Group and several intergenerational dialogues with high-level stakeholders, young feminists have pushed to ensure that our priorities and demands are reflected in the Global Acceleration Plan.² Unfortunately, the accountability mechanism and implementation strategies remain unclear and inaccessible. Although this is a barrier, it also presents a unique opportunity to enact a more thoughtful and intergenerational co-leadership with young people to transform these promises into reality. ‘Nothing about us without us’ is not just a catchy slogan!

LET’S TALK MONEY

It is bizarre, yet understandable given the ‘no end to man’s greed profit-model’, that a person working to sell people products they don’t need is considered a ‘professional’ but a person working on embedding gender and climate awareness into the school curriculum becomes a ‘volunteer’ or ‘social worker’ who is expected to work more hours for less or no pay. Young people are at the forefront of solving the world’s most pressing problems, such as hunger, poverty, climate crisis and gender inequality. Yet our leadership is only considered fit for ‘tomorrow’.

Even with plenty of money in the system, funds are inaccessible to young feminists:³ strict compliance, high expectations and narrow terms of use are just some of the most common barriers experienced at the community level. Young people hardest hit by systemic inequalities are the ones most capable of leading change. Yet, they are also the ones least supported and resourced to manage their basic livelihood needs. Unfortunately, many organisations are stuck in traditional, top-down funding practices. They continue to access free or poorly paid labour in the name of ‘exposure’ and create more cohorts of young people battling burnout when our skills, energy and creativity can otherwise be supported to accelerate progress towards development efforts.

Where senior leadership is open to change and collaboration, a viable solution is easily adopted: flexible, multi-year and accessible funding through participatory grant-making processes is the only way forward. The recently launched Girls’ Fund⁴ – a collaboration between Plan International, Purposeful and the Irish government – shows how multi-stakeholder partnership and participatory grant-making can accelerate access to funds for young people leading change in their communities.

CALLING IT WHAT IT IS: POWER IMBALANCES

It is empowering to see more young people holding spaces at key global policy and advocacy platforms with loud demands and bright recommendations. But the doors to the rooms where *actual* decisions are made are still mostly closed to us.

Unless we openly discuss the sticky and persistent issues of power dynamics – especially when it comes to decision-making, resource-sharing and representation – the inclusion of young people will remain tokenistic. As the Young Feminist Manifesto⁵ highlights, incorporating power analysis, co-ownership of decision-making and agenda-setting power, clear accountability mechanisms and transparency on resourcing are all crucial for transformative action. Expecting young people to challenge the system and lead positive social transformations *without* shared power in decision-making is simply unjust.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING FOR ALL

Capacity-building initiatives for young people are crucial and appreciated. But it is time to also discuss the need for equivalent spaces for ‘older’ allies to work more effectively with generations that experience and approach similar issues in a different way. This is also important to bridge the intergenerational divide and to foster collaboration where the efforts and ideas of the younger generations are not considered less professional.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR GLOBAL COMMITMENTS

I have had the thrilling and humbling opportunity to represent the voices of young people in global forums, on the same platforms where national governments announced their commitments to advance social development efforts. However, youth engagement seems to end with such conferences. There rarely exist any channels through which to follow up on youth engagement in implementation. National governments can play a key role in accelerating these efforts by partnering with community-based young people to localise action and ensure the best use of the available resources.

THE BURNOUT IS NOT PERSONAL

Let the feminist principles of well-being, care, empathy and joy not be reduced to terminologies used only in grant applications and annual reports. Why are so many organisations that are driven to change the ‘external’ community for good not able to resolve their ‘internal’ issues? Why are employees suffering due to unfair wages, inflexible work environments and lack of independence when the organisation’s mission is geared towards human rights? These issues are more pertinent for younger staff where supervisory roles end up trying to mould them into replicating their own styles instead of nurturing what younger staff members bring to the organisation.

Young leaders are expected to share their stories, bring innovation and energy, question power-holders, challenge the system and lead the community project bottom-up – with no consideration for their bandwidth and well-being.⁶ In fact, their hustle is just about rewarded by social media posts and awards – recognition that is short-lived. The burnout and chronic exhaustion experienced by young people in the sector is not personal; it is systemic and needs to be addressed at that level.

THERE IS SO MUCH MORE TO DO

I am thankful for the efforts of the feminists who came before me and paved the way for my generation and those after us to sit at the table. While we celebrate the progress made to date, we must remember that this is just the beginning. A word of caution against celebrating the mere presence of young people as progress, as it can overshadow the urgent issues. Progress can only be accelerated when the current power-holders are truly open to creating an equal space for young people that is rooted in feminist values of equality, justice, well-being and care. The path to a better future cannot be the same as yesterday’s path.

NOTES

- 1 See Generation Equality Forum website, <https://forum.generationequality.org/about>.
- 2 Global Acceleration Plan (2021), <https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/UNW%20-%20GAP%20Report%20-%20EN.pdf>.
- 3 See Association for Women's Rights in Development (2020) *Moving more money to the drivers of change: how bilateral and multilateral funders can resource feminist movements*, https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/MovingMoreMoney_FINALFINAL.pdf.
- 4 Purposeful(2021) 'Whengirlsareatthecentreoftheirowngrant-making', 24 November, <https://we-are-purposeful.medium.com/when-girls-are-at-the-centre-of-their-own-grantmaking-c94938f067d>.
- 5 Generation Equality Forum (2021) *Young Feminist Manifesto*, <https://www.youngfeminist.eu/2021/03/young-feminist-manifesto/>.
- 6 See FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund and Association for Women's Rights in Development (2017) *Brave, Creative, Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organizing*, https://youngfeministfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/frida-awid_young_feminist_organizing_research.pdf.



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