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Locating young women in a plethora of issues: reflections from the tenth Young Women Leader's Conference 2010

Melanie Reyes and Anamaine Asinas

The present article assesses the outcome of the tenth Young Women Leaders Conference, held on 27 September 2010 at Miriam College, Philippines. 'As we see it: young women redefining active citizenship' was the theme of the conference. Its main objective was to inquire into the connections between thinking on citizenship, and Filipino young women's activism, where in the contemporary Philippine socio-political milieu, issues of 'belonging' and 'exclusion' are still being negotiated. The workshops revealed that young women continue to face traditional structural barriers that inhibit them from actively participating in political debate and public life. However, they have created new spaces for asserting varied (re)conceptions of citizenship and gender justice, often mediated by rapidly changing information and communication technologies. Likewise, they are increasingly on the move: the face of labour migration in the Philippines is that of a young woman. How then might migration change our understandings of citizenship? Many young women in the Philippines are engaged in 'everyday revolutions' in spaces where imaginations, alternative visions, and voices are emerging and merging.

Key words: young women; active citizenship; youth leadership

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Introduction

The epic struggle of Filipino women to gain recognition as citizens of the Philippines began in 1906, when the *Asociacion Feminista Ilonga* (Feminist Association of Ilongas [AFI]), founded by Pura Villanueva Kalaw, called for women's right to vote and be represented in government. For more than thirty years, the AFI together with other women's groups in the country initiated a national campaign to draw support to their cause. In 1937, at a national plebiscite on the issue of women's suffrage, 447,725 women voted yes – 100,000 more votes than required by the government; Filipino women's right to vote was granted later that year. At the time she organised the AFI, Pura was just 20 years old.

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While the history of the Filipino women's movement is coloured with astounding stories of young women's active citizenship, most historical narratives do not mention how young women have transcended the traditional socio-cultural boundaries that prevent them from participating, organising and engaging in political discussion and activism. That is, literature on women's movements in the Philippines pays insufficient attention to the struggles of young women, as young women. Issues such as age are often subsumed in larger narratives that tend to see 'women' as one group, cancelling out diversity and individual realities. Of course, perhaps a woman's age does not matter, or matters little in comparison to her active involvement in advancing social justice and human rights. While this may be argued, we would like to suggest in the present article that young women bring in particular energies and knowledge to various social causes. Young women's experiences of, for instance, poverty, armed conflict, and internal displacement, among others, are a world away from the experiences of young males or older women. Young women are usually disproportionately affected, yet their voices are unheard.

The present article draws on young women's voices, views, and passions, expressed at an event that gathered at least 160 young women from Luzon, Philippines, the Young Women Leaders' Conference (YWLC), organised by the Women and Gender Institute, Miriam College, held on 27 September 2010. The aim of the conference was to inquire into how young women re-imagine citizenship. For ten years, the YWLC has provided a safe space for young women to interact, engage in friendly debates, build connections through common threads of lived realities and to critique social issues that are important to them.

The article is divided into three parts. The first briefly introduces the concept of active citizenship; the second is an overview of the contemporary social context in which young women find themselves; and the third is the conversations and reflections that emerged from the YWLC, along with brief sketches of young women's activism. We conclude by sharing our insights on the importance of providing young women with a space to talk and act on issues that matter to them.

What is active citizenship?

'Citizenship, even if our laws define it, its meaning comes from us' (Golda Miñoza, young feminist, speaker at the 2010 YWLC).

Active citizenship means seeing citizenship not only as something that confers formal rights on passive subjects, but as a relationship that promotes participation and agency (Molyneux 2007, 73). It is 'citizenship from the point of view of the agents themselves' (Mukhopadhyay 2007, 281). It draws attention to the various ways in which individuals and groups, especially marginalised groups, claim their rights and redefine social justice. Reconceptualising citizenship this way uncovers issues of

inclusion and exclusion, social action, moral responsibilities, and alternative approaches to development and social change.

Innovations in Civic Participation and Pravah (2009, 21) identify who young active citizens are – they are: (1) aware of social issues of the community, beyond the ones that directly affect them, and take action in this regard; (2) able to identify and provide solutions to the issues around them; (3) able to raise their voices on behalf of themselves and their peers; (4) make personal choices in line with their values; (5) cast a responsible vote; (6) have the ability to think critically and have the confidence to question; (7) respect diverse opinions, listen, accept and respect differences; (8) take leadership roles in community/civil society; (9) reflect on self and their own impact on community; (10) able to deal with a challenge/conflict/negative situation; (11) constantly challenging themselves (beyond their comfort zones); and (12) able to change their community's attitude towards young people.

Active citizenship of the youth, therefore, involves conscious action and participation in a democratic society. Young active citizens are aware of social issues around them and are keen on making a difference, however challenging this is. They are not just passive members of society but are social agents willing to influence public life and act for social change.

Calling for a more inclusive definition of citizenship involves bringing in the voices and views of young people. The Philippines has a young population – typical for many developing countries. The National Statistics Office reported that, in 2007, the population of the Philippines was estimated to be 88,574,614 and of that, the youth 'subsector', aged 15–30, was at least one-third of the population.[1]

While Youth Councils (*Sangguniang Kabataan*) have been set up in barangays[2] – mandated to involve young people in policymaking and the implementation of youth programmes – many local government officials undermine its functions so that youth programmes are reduced to mere basketball competitions and beauty contests. Youth participation is regarded as simple tokenism. Furthermore, the youth as a sector is 'not talked about in social sciences, other than in discussions on drug addiction, unwanted pregnancies, social anarchy, etc.' (Viado 2003). In addition, in a society dominated by men, even youth groups are dominated by young men. Hence, young women have to assert and negotiate their positions in society twice as hard as their male counterparts. Therefore, particular attention must be given to young women's active citizenship, and the multi-dimensional barriers that prevent them from participating in social action.

Young women are engaged in active citizenship in many spaces, but these are usually low profile. They are effecting everyday revolutions, initiated by them at the grassroots level, finding ways to improve their own realities. For instance, Rohaniza Sumndad, 28, has been working with youth groups in Mindanao (southern Philippines) on peace and human rights literacy. By conducting workshops and interactive learning sessions, she has inspired young people to aspire to and work for a

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more sustainable peace in Mindanao, a region threatened by sporadic armed conflicts between government forces and rebel groups. Rohaniza was at the YWLC, to share her experiences of how it is to be a young Muslim woman in a predominantly Christian country. At the conference, she brought her imagination and passion to the discussion, which the participants received very well.

Young women's realities in the Philippines

Around 4,000 Filipinos fly out of the country each day, half of them women. In 2009, it was estimated that there were 8.6 million Filipinos in 214 host countries/territories as permanent, temporary, or irregular migrants (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2009). Women migrants, mostly between the ages of 25 and 34, are concentrated in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong (Philippine Commission on Women 2010). They are employed as house helpers, entertainers, health workers, or caregivers. Remittances from female overseas Filipino workers' (OFWs) worldwide are relatively lower than male OFWs. Of the estimated Php 141.9 billion (approximately US$2.9 billion) remittances for the period of April to September 2008, only 35 per cent (Php 49.7 billion; approximately US$1 billion) came from women OFWs (Philippine Commission on Women 2010).

Labour migration may, on one hand, be empowering for a young woman as she gains economic independence. Remittances sent back home are used for her children or younger siblings' school fees, as well as for food, rent, medical bills, and so on. If she so pleases, she may contribute part of her earnings to community projects in her hometown (also called diasporic philanthropy). On the other hand, female labour migrants face a range of serious risks such as health-related complications from unsafe and unsanitary work environments, sexual and physical abuse, unfair labour practices, and trafficking, among others.

Filipinos migrate because of lack of economic opportunities in the country. Women who stay in the Philippines, willingly or otherwise, find themselves employed in occupations that can be seen as extensions of their traditional reproductive roles, such as teaching, nursing, and domestic work. Female employment in 2010 was estimated at 13.3 million, compared with 21.3 million males in employment (Philippine Commission on Women 2010).

The daily threat of physical violence is a reality, despite the existence of various legislations to prevent violence against women (VAW). In 2009, the number of VAW cases reported to the Philippine National Police (PNP) rose by 37.4 per cent from the level recorded in the 2008 report (Philippine Commission on Women 2010). Physical injuries and domestic violence remain the most prevalent across a 12-year period, from 1997 to 2009, accounting for nearly half (45.5 per cent) of all reported VAW cases nationwide. Reported rape cases, which ranked third, accounted for about 13.1 per cent of total reported VAW cases from 1999 to 2009. While there is a downward trend

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for reported rape cases, figures are still alarming; from 946 in 1999 to 770 in 2009 (Philippine Commission on Women 2010). Women's groups in the Philippines believe that rape cases are under-reported because of the fear of the social stigma survivors of rape have to face, and because of the lack of support services.

Access to quality education is also an issue. Although more girls than boys are enrolled in the formal education system, several studies indicate that many of them will not graduate from high school and college (although completion rate of female students is higher than of males), and even if they do, many will have difficulty looking for employment, and many more will consider migrating.

Gender inequality in political participation continues. Even if the country has had two women presidents, women's political representation has never reached the level of 30 per cent – which is considered to be the 'critical mass' at which female legislators can begin to influence decision-making to benefit women – at the national or local levels of government (Reyes 2010). The proportion of male participation to female participation in governance is unequal. From 1987 to 2009, in both Houses of Congress as well as in provincial boards and municipal/city councils, women comprised less than 20 per cent of the total membership (*ibid*.). From 2007 to 2010, only four of the 23 members of the Senate were women; in the House of Representatives, only 52 out of 269. Neither are the numbers in local government posts encouraging. In the same 2007–2010 period there were 18 women governors compared with 62 men in this post, and 13 women vice-governors compared with 67 men; 274 women mayors compared with 1,319 men; 230 women vice mayors compared with 1,362 men; and 2,329 women councillors compared with 10,797 men. In the Supreme Court, no female Chief Justice has ever been appointed (Reyes 2010).

The Philippines is also faced with a plethora of old pains, such as armed conflicts and the effects of neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes, which contribute to growing inequality in the country, and to environmental degradation, and widespread corruption, among other problems. The Philippines is the only country in the world where people cannot divorce, and reproductive health services for women are almost non-existent.

Then again, Filipino women do have something to be happy about. The 'Magna Carta of Women', or Republic Act 9710 of 2009, a landmark law for women, by women, took a lot of concerted effort from across many sectors to finally bring together a number of diverse women's rights into one law – a law which seeks to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Another recent significant gain for women in the Philippines has been the adoption in 2010 of the National Action Plan (NAP) on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The Philippine NAP outlines practical and operational mechanisms to address the specific needs of Filipino women affected by armed conflicts, and to ensure that women participate and equally benefit from peace efforts.

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Locating young women in a plethora of issues

Where are the young women? Where do they figure in all these big social issues? What do they have to say? What are they doing? Older activists sometimes say that young women today are disengaged, invisible, and inactive. But this is a stereotype that is reinforced by perceptions adults have of young people, especially of young women – that they lack experience and capacities to take on leadership roles. Spaces for young women's activism are thus limited; their capacities to think and act independently are always doubted. Such a stereotype homogenises young women, which fails to recognise the strengths and talents of many, individual, young women.

At the same time, young women's interest in women's movements has dwindled, 'with reasons that have to do with the movement's perceived irrelevance to their concerns', and because these movements are 'dominated by an older generation [which] appears to young women as patronizing, arrogant or misdirected' (Peggy Antrobus, cited in Wilson *et al.* 2005, xii). Lalaine Viado (2003) remarks:

> *[Young women] are always consigned to the future . . . This is often so 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 . . . It implies ineptness which, while may be true, nevertheless effectuates a command to young women to succumb to hierarchies favoring 'older women' that can undeniably turn into 'authorities' deserving the subservience of others . . .*

Filipino culture gives importance to traditional hierarchies, which means adults have the last say. It is seen as rude for a young woman to speak out against her elders. Because of this traditional socialisation, 'many girls do not learn to speak in public and do not have self confidence to get involved in discussions, especially when men are also involved in these discussions' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2005, xxi). To some degree, young women have internalised this subordinate position in society, and as a result, they have become confined to the realm of the home and school, away from the 'adult men's' world.

At this point, we would like to emphasise that 'young women' do not constitute a homogenous group. Differences in their lived realities and identities are influenced by where they live, to which social class, caste or religion they belong, their educational background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities, access to technologies, and so on. However, certain threads common to this generation of young women may be identified. Alison Symington (cited in Wilson *et al.* 2005, 34) elaborates this further:

> *There is no common perspective or view of young women today. Our ideas, interests and goals are as diverse as our appearances and our homes. Yet is fair to say that we have common experiences, which shape both who we are and who we will become. For example, as young people we have universally experienced a lack of power, whether because of our age and our*

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> *dependence on others to meet our needs and fulfill our rights, or because of poverty, discrimination, lack of opportunity or limits placed upon our freedoms.*

Similarly, insecurities about the present and the future, unequal distribution of liberties, difficulty in balancing school and community work, difficulty in finding employment, and gender inequalities are experiences that cut across cultures and travel through borders. A documentation of young women's lived realities and activism, according to Mary Trigg (2010, 1), provides a:

> *. . . contrasting narrative to assumptions about the current death of feminism, the rise of selfishness and individualism within youthful feminism, and the disaffected millennial generation . . . Their stories, as diverse as their identities, challenges the stereotypical portrayals of this generation as being apathetic about politics, social problems and social change.*

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Young women, whether deliberately or not, are pushed to the margins of public life. In debates and action plans concerning women's lives, or the future of the youth, young women are rarely consulted. In an ocean of shifting global and national contexts, decisions are always made for them. But this very dislocation might just well be something which young women grab a hold of, and transform into something positive, something that will challenge existing social, economic, and cultural landscapes. How do we locate young women? The locating happens in the sharing and learning processes that take place within safe spaces – where young women themselves locate their own positions and find their voices, sometimes singular, often multiple in self- and collective reflection, knowledge building, skill sharing, and mutual support. As Antrobus (cited in Wilson *et al.* 2005, xvi) remarks: '[young women] speak from the position of their experience of intersectionality, their passions, struggles, their dreams. The result is something fresh and creative and powerful.'

Responses from the tenth YWLC

The YWLC began in 2000 initially as a class project. Students from the Women and Society class of the International Studies Department of Miriam College organised a forum for young women, aged 17–21 years old, to discuss informally a myriad of issues important to young women. The Conference has been sustained by the Women and Gender Institute (WAGI) and has evolved into an annual gathering of young women leaders from the members of the Consortium of Women's Colleges in Metro Manila. The organising committee of YWLC is composed of young women, who decide on the themes of each year's conference, including the design of the programme and the list of speakers – past themes include 'gender and identity', 'women's human rights', 'violence against women' and 'good governance'.

One-sided monologues and classroom-type lectures can often be tiring and patronising, so the YWLC has moved away from this methodology to a dialogue-workshop

approach. Invited young women speakers present several points of discussion in the morning. These points are then assigned to small groups where YWLC alumnae facilitate the workshop. Responses are collected and shared with the larger group in the afternoon. The dialogue-workshop approach encourages more meaningful and expressive interactions from each participant.

Limitations of the YWLC

While the YWLC aims to capture diverse voices of young women from as many regions in the country as possible, at the moment, participation in the conference has been limited to students from the Consortium of Women's Colleges. Nevertheless, future plans entail opening the conference to include more participants from different provinces (which will also depend on availability of resources). Even if its reach is not yet far and wide, the YWLC regard each participant as a multiplier – so that through the experience, she is enabled to share what she has learned in YWLC with her friends, family, and community. Another limitation is that it is a one-day event. A day is not enough to dig deeper into young women's thoughts and feelings – they might be shy or not comfortable enough. A certain level of bonding may be needed to break the ice. Further, the forum is school-based; i.e., participants are students. But majority of the participants are student-leaders who are also active in community organisations. Moreover, what impact the forum has on the students cannot be easily measured. Awareness of these limitations, has made the organisers more conscious of the need to develop YWLC more, so as to include more young women from different places and social situations.

Identifying young women's issues at the YWLC

Participants at the 2010 YWLC identified several intersecting issues, but owing to space constraints, only three will be discussed here: 'young women and migration'; 'cultural identity and citizenship'; and 'electronic violence against women'.

Locating young women in the issue of migration

> *I wonder if Filipino migrants can express themselves as Filipinos. Can they even express themselves as young persons? When we go to another country, what identity do we bring with us? Automatically, we are placed in a category of laborers. Certainly there are stereotypes attached to Filipino labor migrants and therefore generate certain discriminations.* (Jeremi Panganiban, speaker at the 2010 YWLC)

With more than eight million Filipinos overseas, it has been said that almost all Filipino families, one way or another, have one or more relatives abroad. Young women today are either daughters of labour migrants, or migrants themselves. Being a daughter of

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labour-migrant parents means that in her most formative years, her parents are not with her. Transnational parenting, or virtual parenting, is a new phenomenon brought about by migration. Parents communicate with their children through Skype, texting or email. However, it is sometimes said that the quality of care can suffer, and many children are reported to have been adversely affected by this type of family set-up. Often, daughters take up the roles of absent mothers, preparing food, taking care of younger siblings, and cleaning the house, on top of their schoolwork.

As a young labour migrant, a woman may experience a sense of empowerment and independence as she is able to find employment that pays better. She is not policed by Filipino cultural norms and her family benefits from the remittances she sends home. However, she is exposed to multiple risks, such as illegal recruitment, abusive employers, trafficking, forced prostitution, and other forms of exploitation. Gender stereotypes influence occupational categories for women, too, which limit their work opportunities (which are usually found within the care economy, i.e. domestic work, nursing, and so on). Domestic workers usually work 10–12 hours a day with very few rest days. They are underpaid, and very often not covered by domestic labour laws in host countries. They are not entitled to social security protection or full citizenship in their country of employment. Unfortunately, assistance and protection given to OFWs by the Philippine government have been slow or inadequate.

The issue of marriage migration is an old one, but it continues to affect the lives of young women, especially that it is seen as a ticket out of poverty. The majority of brides are relatively young; between the ages of 20–24 years old (25.74 per cent of the total number of women migrating for marriage) and 25–29 years old (31.4 per cent) (Commission on Filipinos Overseas 2011). This has implications, especially for young women brides who are considered as outsiders in a foreign country. Young brides very often experience exploitation and various forms of discrimination.

Many of the participants at the YWLC revealed that they were daughters of OFWs. Many of them, too, said that they would like to work abroad after graduation or to follow their parents overseas. The following are some more of their reflections regarding migration:

I took up nursing because my parents want me to work abroad.

Do we cease to be a Filipino when we're abroad? I think being a Filipino resides in the heart.

When we are in a foreign country, do we need to assimilate? No amount of whitening cream can prevent them from racialising you.

When do you start and cease to be a woman citizen of a country? Does it begin with being born in a country? Does it start when you're 18? When you can have a passport? Does it end when you go to abroad to work? And when you marry a foreigner, do you relinquish your Filipino citizenship? Do you cease to be a Filipino when you marry?

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> *I lived in the US for eight years. That was the period I realized how different I was. Everybody around me was pressuring me become one of them. Then I came back, but also felt isolated. Abroad, Filipinas are seen as beautiful, here, young women wear colored contact lenses and use whitening lotions.*

Jeremi Panganiban, speaker at the YWLC, researcher and project coordinator at the Women's Legal Bureau (Philippines), remarked that it might perhaps be a good idea to set-up a support group or an advocacy group for daughters of OFWs, where young women who have OFW parents can discuss in more depth the challenges experienced by families-left-behind. We have not heard of a group like this, and it was indeed a clever suggestion.

Cultural identity and citizenship

> *Although the idea of citizenship is nearly universal today, what it means and how it is experienced are not. Nor have they ever been . . . [T]he history of citizenship in both North and South has been a history of struggle over how it is to be defined and who it is to include. However, what is also clear is that a great deal of theoretical debate about citizenship today is taking place in an 'empirical void', where the views and perspectives of 'ordinary' citizens are largely absent.* (Naila Kabeer 2005, 1)

The Philippines, an archipelago of 7,107 islands, is home to about 160 ethnic groups. The area of ethnic identity and citizenship in the Philippines has had a long and controversial history. Some indigenous groups still maintain that the creation of the Philippine state was no more than a project of homogenisation which turned certain groups into minorities.

Twinkle Bautista, 25, sang a beautiful *Kalinga* (an indigenous group from a province of the same name, Kalinga, in northern Philippines) song at the YWLC; she asked the participants to join her in singing. None of the participants had heard of that song, none of them understood the words. She explained what the song meant – believe in your neighbour. Rohaniza Sumndad, 28, greeted the participants with *As-Salāmu 'Alaykum*; after seeing their confused faces she then said, 'that means peace be with you in Arabic and the response to that is *Walaikum assalam*'. Both Twinkle and Rohaniza were speakers at the YWLC. One talked about her journey to discovering what citizenship meant to her as a young woman from *Kalinga*, and the other talked about being a young Muslim woman in a predominantly Christian country only 5 per cent of the population are followers of the Islamic faith.

Narratives of excluded groups reveal 'how they see themselves in relation to others and what this implies for their understanding of citizenship in the world as they know it' (Kabeer 2005, 3).

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> *I remember being confused in school; the teacher said to me that I was Filipino because my parents were Filipinos, that Filipinos wear baro't saya [national costume] and the national language is Filipino, but back home we didn't wear that and we spoke another language.* (Twinkle Bautista)

> *In the media, stereotyping of Muslims is common. In college, my classmates teased me, 'DVD, DVD!' [many Muslims sell DVDs in Manila], or terrorist, warlord, etc. Truth of the matter is, the word Islam comes from 'salama' which means 'peace'. Islam is a religion of peace and not terrorism, we are not taught to be killing people, we are not taught to terrorize people . . . It is not easy for a Muslim woman to be accepted, especially when the society refuses to understand society. This shows how fear and distrust have occurred because of negative perceptions against Muslims.* (Rohaniza Sumndad)

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Rohaniza and Twinkle's experiences vary both by context and by the nature of their ex/inclusion, but a feeling of inferiority did not get in the way of their active involvement in their communities. Twinkle became part of a non-profit organisation in Kalinga as a documentation officer on cultural heritage. She also facilitates workshops on gender, ethnicity, environmental justice and peace for young women in Kalinga. She is often invited by NGOs to talk about issues that affect her community. Rohaniza, on the other hand, knows that children in areas of armed conflict need a space for healing, having experienced war herself when she was younger. With this, Rohaniza initiated a peace caravan with the Asia America Initiative, an event for young people designed to foster unity and understanding, which focuses on education for a culture of peace and action at the community level.

To capture a more inclusive definition of citizenship is to include the common experiences and language of disempowerment and empowerment of groups that do not readily associate themselves with the 'national identity' – their values and experiences give rise to a vision of what an inclusive society might imply. For Twinkle, active citizenship is not a vertical relationship of people, but a horizontal one:

> *My understanding of citizenship comes from my interaction with people, especially those different from me. With this, I was able to understand other cultures more. We live in a country of many cultures, not just one. This is what I would like young people to always be aware of.*

Similarly, Rohaniza emphasised the need for an inter-generational approach to citizenship to break the cycle of discrimination and break down cultural barriers: 'I think it's time they [adults] listen to us; we want peace and we know we can achieve peace amongst diversity'. Like Twinkle and Rohaniza, young women's active citizenship takes place in the informal context of everyday life; they plant little dream-seeds everywhere they go, inspiring young minds, hearts and hands to work for alternative futures.

Electronic-violence against women (e-VAW)

New information and communications technologies (ICT) produce very different qualities and practices of citizenship; from a notion of active citizenship based on geographical locations to a de-territorialised definition of civic engagement. ICTs have drastically changed the ways in which we communicate and disseminate information; possibilities for advocacy and activism are thus expanded. Activism in local communities 'escapes' borders, which are then linked with global justice movement(s), bringing in more voices, more strategies for collaboration, more visions of alternative futures. Those who have access to new technologies can instantly find information on almost anything. They can participate in online discussions on various issues, initiate Web campaigns, motivate others to engage in activism, and express solidarity with other people anywhere in the world. Pau Rampola, 22, a young feminist at the YWLC 2010 noted:

> *ICTs serve as a new medium for asserting our rights . . . Some people think that it is useless to type a Facebook status or blog about an issue; but what they don't realise is because of this technology, what is personal reaches many more beyond our immediate circles.*

Indeed, ICTs have been used as strategic mobilising tools – text messaging played a vital role in the 2001 EDSA People Power Revolution in the Philippines[3] and social networking sites contributed to stimulating youth participation in the 2011 Egyptian people's revolution, which led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak.

Members of the CEDAW Youth Network[4] get together rarely (in a physical sense), but are active in online conversations. The Network does not have a physical office and collaboration is done mostly by email. In 2009, CEDAW Youth Network released a public statement on the Maguindanao Massacre (of the 57 people murdered, 23 were women)[5], expressing great concern over increasing human rights violations in the country. The document was completed via several email exchanges during the day and was sent to different mailing lists, which later caught the attention of a national broadsheet. This statement had given shape and identity to young women as a concerned group of citizens. The presence of young women with social consciousness is increasing online. A growing online community, with thousands of subscribers worldwide, called the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) has an active website for young women, the Young Feminist Wire. The Wire was created for young women who are interested in women's rights and gender equality and development. Activist resources and capacity building opportunities are shared with its subscribers.[6]

Anna Dinglasan, 30, a member of CEDAW Youth Network and speaker at the YWLC, remarked that blogs and social networking sites have introduced a space for young women to talk about topics still considered taboo in some societies – such as, gender identities, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, sexual and reproductive

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health, and abortion, among others. Hence, a young woman who identifies herself as lesbian and who finds it difficult to talk to her friends or family about this identity, may blog about it and find online support groups. It may be comforting to know that there are other young women out there with similar stories. In this virtual space, real emotions are present.

While on one hand ICTs can be an empowering tool for young women, on the other, young women are constantly exposed to a range of 'electronic violence'. Kara Santos, also a member of CEDAW Youth Network, and a contributor to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, writes:

> *. . . cyber and mobile harassment, cyber stalking, involuntary cyber prostitution, online child pornography and unauthorised recording, reproduction and distribution of images and videos, are among the forms of eVAW (electronic violence against women) . . . male students are using their mobile phones to capture risqué photos of women wearing mini-skirts and later share these voyeuristic shots with their peers.* (Santos 2010)

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As of May 2011, the Philippines ranked third in terms of the number of Facebook users in the world, with over 24.5 million users (socialbakers.com n.d.). The majority of the participants at the YWLC are on Facebook and other social networking sites. They expressed concern over e-VAW, especially cyberbullying and cyberstalking. Realising that ICTs are now being used to perpetuate VAW, a campaign called 'Take Back the Tech!' (TBTT) was launched, calling on all ICT users, especially women and girls, to take control of technology and strategically use any ICT platform (mobile phones, blogs, digital cameras, email, podcasts, etc.) for activism against gender-based violence (www.takebackthetech.net). TBTT reports that 80 per cent of cyberstalking victims – as in life offline – are female, and that perpetrators are not just strangers, but people victims know. Knowing how to prevent e-VAW will help young women to reclaim ICTs.

Recommendations from the conference

The following are some of our reflections on why and how to involve young women in active citizenship

Locate young women in the debate

The locating happens in the sharing and learn–ing processes that take place within safe circles–where young women themselves determine their own position(s) and find their voice(s), sometimes singular, often multiple. Older activists, giving long sermons to young people on the need to get involved in actions towards social change, can often be patronising and sometimes disempowering. While their intention is to encourage young minds to think critically about their social contexts, or mentor the youth in

social action (both laudable aims), conventional classroom-type lecturing replicates and reinforces the traditional hierarchical ordering of societies, privileging the so-called 'seasoned' while dismissing (unintentionally or otherwise) young and emerging advocates for social change as inadequately experienced, and immature. Moving away from one-sided monologues into creative forms of dialogue in a space rooted in mutual respect, is not only appealing to youth movements, this methodology encourages meaningful interaction which stimulates young people to speak from real-life contexts.

Allow space for introspection

Young women need to reflect upon a plethora of intersecting issues that directly or indirectly affect them. Forums like the YWLC provide a safe space for young women to contemplate ways to respond to the challenges facing them.

Show confidence in young-women-led initiatives

See the wisdom in their desires and activism. Young women's concerns are not mundane, they are not shallow. They are real challenges. While they experience difficulties in school, they also have to endure poverty, discrimination, gender-based violence, e-VAW, etc. Allow young women to think for themselves, set their own agenda, strategise and initiate projects. When you involve young women, trust that they can do the work in their own creative and unique way. Programmes for the youth must recognise the power dynamics that exist between young men and women. As Jennifer Plyler (2005, 148) puts it:

> *. . . supporting young women does not only mean making space for them in already existing organisations and movements, nor does it only include efforts to mentor or share knowledge and experience . . . it means giving time, energy and support to the initiatives and actions they are leading.*

Think diversity

Expand spaces to include more young women from diverse backgrounds. Young women are not a homogenous group. Let them express their intersecting identities as much as their intersecting concerns. A young woman is not one but many – she is a daughter, a young mother, or a sister, while at the same time a member of an ethno-linguistic group, queer, poor, rich, migrant, living in a refugee camp, in gated communities, from the global South or from the global North. Young women carry these multiple identities in every space she moves around in and any project about young women must be cognisant of this.

Regard every young woman as a multiplier

Include capacity building workshops so that she is able and enabled to share with her friends, family and communities all that she learns from programmes, workshops and

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other sources (such as the YWLC). Every young woman has the capacity to make informed decisions. However, unavailability of resources may pose as a big challenge as the many other constraints she may be facing.

Consider new modes of engagement

See the potential of ICTs to encourage popular support. Protect young women from e-VAW. ICTs are the new generation's power tools; however, access to the technology is still gendered and limited.

Document narratives of young women's active citizenship

It is important that their stories be brought to the fore. In this way, they become visible, and their concerns are not subsumed by the larger youth or women's agendas.

Conclusion

Ten years since YWLC was created, the organisers have heard and felt young women's frustrations, confusion, and anger, as well as their hopefulness and optimism. Young women are constantly told what to do, how to behave in public, and even how to think. If they become vocal and speak out, they are regarded as 'improper'. As a consequence, young women are constantly searching for spaces in which they can talk freely. Young women need a space for self-healing and empowerment, a safe and enabling venue where they can learn from each other, articulate their perspectives on a myriad of issues, and encourage each other to engage in activism that is transformative and positive, without fear of hypercritical eyes. To overlook the ways in which young women engage and approach various issues is to neglect alternative futures, and new ways of being, doing and becoming.

A significant insight worth noting, which the organisers considered a welcome revelation at the 2010 conference, was how young women have expanded possibilities for social engagement in the twenty-first century, adding new twists to old issues, asserting varied (re)conceptions of citizenship and gender justice mediated by rapidly changing ICTs. Young women, more than ever, are using ICTs for activism, where imaginations, alternative visions and voices are emerging and merging, activating unpoliticised youth, calling for collective action and shaping new political environments of civic action, whilst adding a new flavour and vigour to old problem-solving approaches.

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Both Melanie and Anamaine are founding members of the CEDAW Youth Network (www.cedaw-watch.org/cedawyouthindex.html). They were part of the organising committee of the tenth Young Women Leaders Conference (YWLC).

Notes

1 By definition, the youth, under Republic Act 8044 (Youth in Nation Building Act) of the Philippines, are those between the ages of 15 and 30. (National Youth Commission n.d.)

2 The *barangay* is the smallest political-administrative unit within the government structure of the Philippines. It is akin to a small neighbourhood or village.

3 The 2001 people's revolution that led to the impeachment of Joseph Estrada as the President of the Philippines, and which took place on the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA).

4 The CEDAW Youth Network (Philippines) is an association of students and young women professionals, which aims to promote and campaign for the human rights of women in line with the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, with particular attention given to the rights of young women.

5 The Maguindanao Massacre of 2009 was the kidnapping and murder of a group of people in election-related political violence in Maguindanao, Philippines, and has been dubbed 'the single deadliest event for journalists in history' (Papa 2009). Of the 57 people murdered, 23 were women. For CEDAW Youth's Statement, see: http://www.cedaw-watch.org/cedawyouthspeakonMindanaomassacre.html (last accessed 16 August 2011)

6 Young Feminist Wire, see: http://yfa.awid.org (last accessed 16 August 2011)

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