

Keeping the faith: women's current day experiences, challenges and hopes for the future

**The democratisation of global feminism:
the case of the World YWCA and HIV**

Introduction

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and paying my respects to their elders, past and present. I thank my sister speakers for their inspiring lives and work and their words today.

Given our theme “keeping the faith” and the “C” in the YWCA, I think Sarah is a little anxious that I will start preaching from the pulpit; let me reassure you that proselytising, at least about matters of religion, is not what the YWCA does (though if we’re talking about conversions to the importance of human rights and of women’s leadership, that’s a different matter). But the YWCA does have something to say about women’s spirituality and on that score, let me make two brief observations only: first, that women’s well being is not just about our physical and mental health, but also about the spiritual dimension of our lives – for instance, we know from our work with survivors of violence that the damage to women’s physical selves mends easily compared to the damage to our spiritual selves; and second, that if women in Australia want to engage with women of minority faiths then we have to acknowledge that secularism may be very alien to some cultural traditions *and* that secularism often masks the assumptions of the dominant faith group to the exclusion of other beliefs and values. But enough about the “C”.

What I want to speak this afternoon about are the “Y” – young, “W” – women and “A” – association, and in particular to put our challenges and hopes as Gen X feminists into a global context. I want to share how we might move beyond some of the challenges posed to our feminist faith: the intellectual anguish about universal human rights and cultural relativism (articulated by postmodern critics in the university and illustrated by endless conversation about Muslim women and the veil); beyond the risk of paralysis, wrong action or unintended consequences created by the diversity of women’s experience (or the old gender vs race dichotomy, playing out here in the context of interventions reacting to sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities); and beyond our own preoccupation with the characterisation of feminism in the media and the popular imagination.

So let me start with a few well known facts about the global context for women, tell you a little more about the YWCA as part of the international women’s movement, and reflect on the changing face of the women’s movement, using the example of the response to the feminisation of HIV. I want to finish by celebrating the much wider lens through which young women engage in their feminism and by reinforcing the great feminist lesson that how we organise, who is resourced and who speaks all matter in our shared project of improving the world for women.

World’s women

I don’t want to dazzle you with data, but let me mention five troubling, familiar and related facts: between one fifth and one half of all girls and young women worldwide report that their first sexual encounter was forced; 70% of the world’s poor are women; 60% of the people living with HIV globally are women; women and children comprise 80% of the world’s refugees; there is

only one country where women have reached more than 50% of national Parliaments (and this in Rwanda, where many more than half of the population is women because of the genocide) and less than a third of countries world wide do women make up more than 20% of national Parliaments. Numbers count – and not just for bankers and political party apparatchiks; so we have to insist on the collection of reliable statistical information. The figures tell us that in terms of the body, the household, the market, the state and the planet, gender inequality is alive and kicking.

But numbers alone are inadequate; because everyone of those numbers is a human being, a woman with a story – a past and a future, full of challenges and hopes. And without sharing those stories we will deny the dignity of those women's lives and we will never move the hearts of people with power to accept change. We need the stories to know how the race, class, generation and background of women are integral to their lived experiences of disadvantage, privilege, opportunity and achievement.

There are two key ways in which the YWCA as a global women's movement reaching 25 million women and girls in 125 countries responds to these numbers and these stories: the first is through working locally, at the grassroots, in communities, responding to locally identified need with local leadership and capability; this local expertise in turn informs our global advocacy priorities around peace with justice, violence against women, economic justice and women's sexual and reproductive rights. The second is by democratising our movement, entrenching young women's leadership and institutionalising cultural diversity within our structures. So let me tell you a little more about the YWCA.

YWCA

Founded more than 150 years ago in England, the Young Women's Christian Association was established in England to provide material and spiritual support for young women coming to the cities during the late Industrial Revolution: bible classes were held to nurture young women's Christian development and safe affordable shelter was provided for working women, including nurses following Florence Nightingale to the Crimean War.

Now the YWCA is in over 22,000 communities around the world. Ask a stranger and they'll tell you: the Y runs hostels (where once you couldn't get a drink or bring your boyfriend overnight; in many cases, that's changed). But actually we are working on everything from violence against women, to HIV and AIDs, to economic empowerment, to education and literacy, to sexual and reproductive health, to women's political participation, to climate change.

For example, if you are a young woman who survived the tsunami, lived through the civil war but now face violence in your personal relationship, the YWCA in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka will welcome you to their Centre for Hope and Healing, a place for women of all religions, cultures and backgrounds, providing shelter, vocational training and a safe space to recover and rebuild; if you are a young woman in East Jerusalem or the West Bank, you can join other young Israelis and Palestinians who together plant trees for peace through the YWCA of Palestine's Olive Tree campaign; if you are in the resource rich, war torn, very violent Democratic Republic of Congo, you will find young women in the YWCA leading sex education and civic education to promote sexual and reproductive rights and peace building; as a young woman in the USA, you can participate in the YWCA's hallmark anti racism campaigns built on their dual mission of "eliminating racism, empowering women", confident in the

knowledge that some of the first public places where black and white women could share a meal were YWCA cafeterias; if you are a young woman in Belarus, considering an invitation to go to the West for work as a waitress, a nanny, an entertainer, you can call the YWCA hotline which provides information about travel, the risks of trafficking, your human rights.

All YWCA work is about responding to the needs of women and their families in their local communities; and all YWCA work is underpinned by a conviction about the value of women's leadership, especially young women's leadership, and by a commitment to social change.

In simple terms, our plan is to end violence, overcome poverty, stop war and halt HIV. Our greatest resource: **women's** leadership. (I should add, whether it's the hegemony of patriarchy or the popularity of the Village People, I am still congratulated on my new role in the YMCA, and so I'm working on both a feminist revolution and a catchy tune from P!nk.)

Because of its history and its values, the YWCA has been part of many of the significant transformations of the 20th century: the peace movement, the rise of human rights, ecumenism, decolonisation, the women's movement and the movement for fair globalisation. And the composition of the World YWCA reflects these global changes: YWCAs in non Protestant countries established during the early years of ecumenism; during decolonisation, independent YWCAs throughout Africa and Asia shifted the power within the movement away from North America and Western Europe to the Global South; with the collapse of communism, YWCAs re-emerged after years of isolation throughout central and eastern Europe.

In case it's not evident why I joined the YWCA in my early 20s, I'll give you a couple more insights. In the mid 1990s during the whole Helen Garner, Anne Summers, Germaine Greer thing, the YWCA was the only women's organisation that didn't just talk about young women's participation but actively involved them: including young women in decision making, not just as tokens, but as a critical mass in boards and committees; dedicating resources to young women; delivering programmes designed by young women; and trusting young women to identify their own priorities and develop their own solutions. Now all but a few of the National YWCA Board in Australia are young women and more than half the World Board are young women. Part of that is because of a constitutional requirement that at least 25% of boards and decision making structures must be comprised of young women (a quota system we're proud of); of course, in many cases we have now surpassed that minimum standard and young women are the mainstream of our movement.

I was also at university when we grappled with intersectionality and the critique from within and outside mainstream feminism that the women's movement had excluded and also failed women of colour, women with disabilities, lesbians, women different to the mainstream. In theory and in practice we struggled with women's diversity and the universalising claims of feminism. To my mind there are at least two options to this dilemma: to disintegrate, to fragment, to subscribe to identity politics, to start one's own revolution; but in my case if I were start my own society for Canberra-born, Christian, lesbian, Gen X barristers and mothers of two, I reckon I'd be quite lonely. The better course from my point of view is not to pack your own picnic but instead to make more room at the table, to expand existing institutions and organisations to embrace difference and to be open to the change that such expansion will bring. So joining the World YWCA with its local action and

advocacy, its global outreach and its commitment to young women seemed the logical choice.

HIV

A good study of the difference it makes when women of the Global South lead the international women's movement can be found in the YWCA's response to HIV. As the International Community of Women Living with HIV and AIDS will gently remind you, it took a long time for the women's movement globally to respond to the HIV pandemic. Here in Australia, we might seek to explain our lack of attention by observing that women make up less than 15% of people living with HIV. But, of course, it's simply unacceptable to sideline a pandemic which affects women in gendered ways, which stigmatizes and silences HIV positive women, which is raging out of control in our neighbor in Papua New Guinea, which is driven by intersections of poverty, violence, gender inequality and discrimination against marginalized communities. It was because of the leadership of African women in the YWCA movement that over a decade ago, that YWCAs around the world embraced HIV as key advocacy and programme priority.

YWCAs in 70 countries deliver prevention, care, treatment and support programmes, often in partnership with HIV positive women and their own organizations. For instance, in Peru, the YWCA runs computer training programmes with HIV positive women, creating a safe and accepting space for very marginalised and economically disadvantaged women; in Albania, the YWCA runs HIV awareness programmes with Roma women, one of the most disadvantaged and discriminated against communities in Europe and also one of the most vulnerable to HIV infection; in Belize, which has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the Caribbean, the YWCA runs Bella Expressions, a

beauty salon where early school leavers can learn hair dressing and cosmetology and have information about safe sex practices in an open and non-judgemental environment; in Sudan, the YWCA provides access to antiretroviral medicine for displaced HIV positive women and seeks to counter the myth that HIV is caused by witchcraft; in southern India, the YWCA provides a travelling bus providing information and access to treatment in a setting run by and for women.

What the women of the Global South have taught us is that women are at the centre of the epidemic, as young women at risk of HIV infection in negotiating sexual relationships, as married women practising monogamy who became HIV positive, as orphans and child headed households, as grandmothers and girl children who become carers. With their HIV positive sisters, YWCAs have demonstrated how violence against women, poverty and gender inequality fuel the spread of the pandemic and how discriminatory and judgmental attitudes about sexuality are part of the problem. YWCAs have taught us about the growing incidence of HIV and its consequences for communities. YWCAs have explained the vulnerability of young women to HIV and the influence of young women in halting its spread.

Had the leadership of the YWCA remained in New York, Geneva or London, the World YWCA would not likely have been a trailblazer in the global response to the feminization of HIV and would not have jointly hosted with the International Community of Women Living with HIV the first international summit on women's leadership in response to HIV, would not have organised the largest gathering for HIV positive women around the world, and would not have jointly authored the Nairobi Declaration and Call to Action on HIV. In taking up this role, YWCAs contributed to a dramatic (and ongoing) shift in

thinking within faith communities and within the women's movement, and to a rupturing of the conventional wisdom about reproductive rights, morality, equality and women's bodies.

This lesson – to ask who is most effected and how they are heard, resourced and included – has equal application in our response to climate change, peace and economic justice.

Conclusion

I learned an invaluable slogan from the HIV positive women at Nairobi: “nothing about us without us”. For me, it resonates with the activist voices of the suffragists in Victoria who secured our right to vote 100 years ago. On the back of my door in chambers is the Heritage Council calendar for 2008, which in a successful act of gender mainstreaming, reproduces part of the largest petition ever presented to the Victorian Parliament on any question, from more than 30,000 women in Victoria, at 260 metres in length. The petition reads:

That government of the people by the people and for the people should mean all the people and not one half; that taxation and representation should go together without regard to the sex of the taxed; that all adult persons should have a voice in making the laws which they are required to obey; that in short women should vote on equal terms with men.

That message about representation, participation, voice and equality echoes down the decades to our generation of feminists; it reminds us that inclusion and diversity remain important political demands both of our representatives and also of ourselves. Through the organisations we serve, the campaigns we join, the petitions we sign, the products we purchase, the donations we make,

the conversations we have and the choices that most of us have the opportunity to make, we remember that while “the personal is political”, the personal is not always universal and that the only solution to not speaking for others is to be part of a conversation in which women from many different contexts speak, listen and genuinely understand. I am struck by how the Gen Y feminists I encounter in the World YWCA have a global sense of connection, responsibility and opportunity and engagement, which reassures me that the faith and the legacy of our foremothers is in excellent hands.

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