HER FUTURE

The Future Young Women Want: A Global Call to Act

Background:

The world stands at a critical juncture. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that have dominated the global development agenda for the past 15 years are due to expire in 2015. Leaving many people asking ‘what next?’.

In the lead up to this critical deadline, progress reports are emerging that show both encouraging achievements and disappointing setbacks. For example, the latest UN MDGs Report (2012) shows a reduction in the number of people living on under $1.25 a day from 2 billion to 1.4 billion, indicating that MDG 1 could be achieved ahead of its deadline. Other areas of success include achieving parity in primary education between boys and girls, declines in global malaria deaths and increased access to treatment for people living with HIV in all regions.

Sadly, the report goes on to highlight that persistent gender inequality continues to undermine all efforts in achieving the MDGs. This has resulted in continuing challenges in ending violence against women and girls, securing sexual and reproductive health and rights and leveraging women’s contribution to economies around the world.

The time to mobilise young women to contribute towards influencing the post-MDG agenda is now. While the final content is yet to be decided, the next set of goals will significantly direct human, technical and financial resources of major international and regional institutions, and governments. It is imperative that this framework is shaped by the voices of the world’s 860 million young women, who are among those most vulnerable to poverty, hunger and poor health outcomes. The post-2015 development agenda must capture the needs, assets and aspirations of this critical population group.

Her Future has been compiled by the World YWCA in the lead up to the review of the MDGs to give young women a voice in the future they want for their families, communities and countries. It has been developed following extensive consultation with young women across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, The Caribbean, Middle East, Pacific and North America and encompasses both new research and the outcomes of recent meetings of young women at regional and global levels.

Experience has shown us that alone, the individual voices of young women are often forgotten or ignored, but together their collective voice is deafening.
HER FUTURE

A future where a determined young woman through her will, creativity, ideas, energy and community support, will turn HER DREAMS into HER REALITY.
HER Future

The Future Young Women Want is a future where there is gender equality, laws are respected and rights are protected. It is a future where everyone, everywhere has access to nutritious food, quality health care, basic services such as clean water and electricity, as well as housing, education, employment, technology and transportation. Young women dream of a world of peace, security and sustainable living, where they can realise their full potential, free of discrimination.

HER Value

1. Young women aged between 18-30 years constituted around 860 million of the world’s population in 2010\(^2\). That is 860 million beating hearts and 860 million opinions, 860 million ways to see the stars and 860 million ways to dance. There are 860 million unique smiles and 860 million laughs. And there are 860 million dreams to be realised.

2. Young women have an important role to play in building communities and nations - they are a vital part of the one billion who will enter the labour market this decade, they are the future mothers that can transform families, and they have enormous human capital that can change the course of humanity. The experiences of young women are different from the experiences of young men, and women as a general category: a ‘one size fits all approach’ undermines efforts to effect change and recognition of diversity.

3. Underpinning any programmes targeted at young women should be a human rights based approach to development that promotes meaningful participation, non-discrimination and accountability of duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. Young women have the right to actively participate in the design and delivery of programmes aimed to benefit them. This means that organisations and institutions have an obligation to ensure this. The World YWCA is committed to leading by example in our own processes that engage and consult with young women and give opportunities for leadership.

4. In a world where ‘one in three women will be beaten or raped in her lifetime’\(^3\), successful and sustainable change will require transformative leadership. This means leadership that will challenge and change the status quo and the systems and structures that perpetuate discrimination, inequality and denial of human dignity.

5. In a young woman’s life, the transition from adolescence is a time of gaining independence, exercising accountability, participating in decision-making, starting relationships, having children, making mistakes, learning lessons and developing character. The wisdom and insights of mentors of all ages can be instrumental in shaping young women’s choices and decisions so they can safely transition into adulthood. The ideas and creativity of young women can also bring new and innovative approaches. For this reason the World YWCA promotes intergenerational leadership and dialogue that respects the contribution all ages can make.

6. Meaningful engagement of young women can be understood as a series of empowering moments that move in the direction of the ‘decision-making table’. She can advise, share, sing or cry her opinions on political reforms, policies, programmes and development initiatives that directly affect her and will allow for effective use of resources, both human and natural.

7. If we are to achieve a world of peace, equality and justice, we must be accountable to the world’s 860 million young women. They are more than a statistic - they are a valuable asset to nations, a critical population group for achieving sustainable human development and their voices must count in shaping the future of humanity.
**HER Challenges**

Young women in the world continue to face challenges in achieving: economic security; informed choices free of coercion and discrimination about their sexual and reproductive health; freedom from all forms of violence; equal access to resources and information; and active citizenship and opportunities for leadership development. Despite numerous calls for meaningful participation by young women, they continue to ‘fall through the cracks’ because they are not sufficiently covered by initiatives targeting children, are outnumbered by boys in young people’s programmes, and are often unable to speak out in women’s spaces.

Young women must be recognised as a critical population group in achieving development and not absorbed into generic approaches.

**Violence Against Young Women and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights** of young women are intricately linked. Acts of sexual violence are a direct attack on sexual rights, impacting on both physical and mental health and the ability to control one’s sexuality. Likewise, without access to non-judgmental, confidential and evidence-based sexual and reproductive health information and services, young women remain vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections. Every minute a young woman is newly infected with HIV and only one in five young women in developing countries know the basic facts about HIV. Many young women are confronted with the consequences of early and forced marriage and child bearing. Adolescent pregnancies often described as ‘a child birthing another child’ account for 18% of all births in the Latin America and the Caribbean regions alone. Young women who give birth before the age of 18 face increased risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Young women must have access to comprehensive sexuality and HIV education, reproductive health services and commodities, and the ability to decide freely when to marry and have children, if the right to health is to become a reality. All forms of violence that impact on this right must be eradicated.

Bearing in mind young women represent a life-phase as well as a critical target group, the childhood experiences of young women must be taken into account. Global figures show that around 250,000 children are child soldiers, of which 40% are girls. In Africa an estimated 92 million girls aged 10 years and above have undergone female genital mutilation and there are over 60 million girls married before their 18th birthday, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Furthermore, an estimated 150 million girls under 18 years suffered some form of sexual violence in a given year and one third of children in Southern Asia were overweight in 2010. The physical scars and psychological trauma resulting from these experiences, whether as victims or witnesses, impacts on the socialisation of a young woman. It breeds emotional insecurity, dysfunctional social relationships, weakens confidence and the ability to contribute to community life, diminishes productivity and reduces the ability to achieve economic independence. We must ensure a dramatic societal shift in the life of the girl child so that young women can achieve their full potential.

There is a growing concern over the ‘Lost Generation’, predicated by the International Labour Organisation as consisting of young people, both men and women, ‘who have detached themselves completely from the labour market, having lost all hope of being able to work for a decent living’. Economic independence cannot be achieved if young women continue to earn wages that are 70-90% of their male counterparts despite increasing educational levels or are subjected to sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace (ILO 2012). Compared to their male counterparts, young women are most vulnerable to the adverse effects of unemployment or underemployment due to the added burden of gender disparity. In 2011 the regions with the highest gender gaps were South Asia (34.1%), Middle East (33.6%) and North Africa (27.4%). Corruptive practices at state level, impunity of lawbreakers or inadequate enforcement, high interest rates and maternity discrimination are also under currents to young women’s vulnerability. Young women must be able to access decent employment and wages, as well as fair working conditions if communities are to thrive.
Even as young women are promoted as a critical target group for the new development agenda, we know that some young women face greater marginalisation and exclusion. Sexual orientation and gender identities, race, ethnicity and HIV status are too frequently causes of discrimination and prejudice. Young women migrants and those living in rural and remote communities, with disabilities or illiterate all tend to experience deeper levels of marginalisation. We must promote inclusive societies and reach the most vulnerable if we are to achieve sustainable human development.

**HER Call**

**The Future Young Women Want must be based on an overall framework that ensures:**

a. A Human Rights Based Approach: Young women globally have echoed a strong call for human rights principles to be embedded in any international, regional and national frameworks to ensure development respects, protects and fulfills the human rights of all people.

b. Mainstream gender across all goals and targets, ensuring they are disaggregated by age and sex, with common global indicators and nationally set targets to enable real progress in young women’s lives that is not skewed by varying demographics.

c. An integrated approach with other global review processes including the 20 year reviews of the Beijing Platform for Action, the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and the Rio+ 20 Sustainable Development Goals, as well as respect for existing international obligations as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and other human rights conventions to ensure resources are maximised and coordinated.

d. Accountability, monitoring and evaluation of future goals and targets with processes that strengthen national ownership, increase results and improve resource allocations across the comprehensive agenda, and promote partnership among governments, civil society and private sector.

**Post-2015 Development Agenda:**

To ensure the Future Young Women Want, the following recommendations are made to the United Nations, governments and civil society in determining the post-2015 development agenda:

a. Retain gender equality as a primary goal in the new agenda with accelerated efforts and expanded resourcing to eliminate persistent gender inequalities and discrimination.

b. By 2030, young women of the world want:

i. Elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls by ensuring zero tolerance of violence and an end to impunity for perpetrators.

ii. Eradication of early and forced marriage, and other harmful practices including female genital mutilation.

iii. Comprehensive and age-appropriate sexuality education for all young people in and out of school, including training of health educators to ensure evidence-based, non-judgmental and confidential information provision.

iv. Universal and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights

v. Universal access to effective and voluntary HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services for all those who need it.

vi. Elimination of legal and social barriers that prevent full access to health and other services.

vii. Full enrolment of girls and boys in primary and secondary schooling.

viii. Equal access to decent employment and economic opportunities, as well as equal access to, control and ownership of property.

ix. Equitable access and participation of young women, including those from vulnerable groups, in decision making at all levels and in all sectors towards building peaceful, sustainable and healthy communities.

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1. From a World YWCA survey conducted from November 2012 - January 2013 of young women from YWCAs in over 100 countries
2. UNFPA, 2011
3. Statistics: One Billion Rising
5. UNAIDS, 2011
9. Say No to Violence Fact Sheet (as above)
12. World YWCA survey of young women
Present in over 120 countries, in 22,000 communities and with an outreach of 25 million women and girls, the World YWCA movement supports young women to claim their human rights and reach their full potential through leadership opportunities and rights-based programmes and services.