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Our Ancestors Wildest Dreams? Young feminists uphold the visionary potential of Beijing!

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Abstract: From demands for climate justice in the face of the neoliberal economic development models that prioritizes profit over people and the planet; to the abortion movement in Argentina #SeraLey to secure reproductive freedoms; to #FeesMustFall in South Africa which sought to reframe access to education as a fundamental human right; now, more than ever, young feminists are inspiring hope across the world.

Despite the present tumultuous times for women's rights and gender equality, young feminists are strategizing and mobilizing within and across movements to build strong multigenerational movements. This paper will reflect on the persisting struggles and new manifestations of patriarchy that directly intersect with other systems of oppression, twenty five years since the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) was adopted.

The World Young Feminists Face Today: The more things change, the more they remain the same?

In September 1995, all feminist roads led to Beijing for the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women. It was a watershed moment as over 189 countries adopted a landmark roadmap "The Beijing Platform for Action" that would firmly place women's rights and gender equality on governments agenda. Since then, the world has changed in ways that are both disheartening and promising to the feminist cause.

The world today is at the juncture of **multiple and concurrent systemic crises**. 25 years post-Beijing, capitalist accumulation is at height with 1% of the world's population owning the wealth equivalent to half the world's population. An Oxfam publication "[Public Good or Private Wealth](#)" reported that there are more billionaires today than ever before, with a new billionaire being created every two days between 2017 and 2018.

Wealth today is not just held in the hands of a few people but also huge multinational corporations. Research shows that [78.5% of the top 200 global economic entities are transnational corporations and not countries](#), a percentage that has been steadily rising over the years. With this economic muscle, corporations have slowly but steadily fortified their presence, interest and influence in global governance, the development sector and philanthropy. At the same time, market-oriented business approaches are being advocated to provide 'innovative' solutions to environmental challenges and rising inequalities including gender inequalities. Unfortunately, the rise in corporate power has not been correlated with a stronger accountability mechanism even though today there are stronger voices now, such as [#Feminists4BindingTreaty](#), calling for a legally binding instrument for transnational corporations and other business enterprises.

The current global political moment is also marked by a **crisis in democracy and democratic situations and rising fascisms, xenophobia and fundamentalisms** with particularly high costs for young women, girls and gender-non conforming persons. In the recent past, we have witnessed the greatest humanitarian crisis where [thousands of refugees die in the Mediterranean](#) and survivors of the journey welcomed by hostile anti-refugee and immigrant policies; incarceration, deportation and state violence towards migrant and refugee women in Europe and a migrant crisis at the Mexico-United States border; the re-instatement of the 'Global Gag Rule' by the Trump Administration in the United States, with [far-reaching impacts on the reproductive health choices and lives](#) of young women, girls and trans youth across the world; the highest reported rates of [sexual violence in Brazil with girls under 13 years old making up more](#)

[than half of female victims](#) and a preventable climate crisis and ecocide driven by greed and accumulation of resources such as witnessed in the [Amazon forest fires](#).

Meanwhile, multilateral spaces, an invaluable structure for creating and advancing universal human rights frameworks and holding States accountable like the United Nations (UN) still yet to achieve gender parity at leadership levels, despite groundswell support calling for a female United Nations (UN) Secretary General, with reports that it will take [at least 703 years to reach gender parity](#) at this current recruitment and retention rate.

Furthermore, the UN struggles with funding challenges and is more and more vulnerable to the [risk of corporate capture and/or excessive influence by fundamentalist actors](#). By increasingly influencing the language on rights and development, these actors use UN spaces to produce outcomes that impede progress for women's right and gender equality¹. The Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs) in its report, [Rights at Risk](#), highlights that *"conservative actors have successfully mobilized a growing number of activists under the age of thirty to push for regressive agenda at the world stage."* These actions not only represent a threat to young feminist organizing but also an impending claw back on all the social progress of the last 25 years in pursuit of a world of shared responsibility and global solidarity.

The world continues on a path towards violence. The deadly interplay of colonization, genocide of indigenous peoples, rising fundamentalism and widening inequalities has meant that Latin American and African countries continue to register **high rates of femicides**. However, gender related violence and killings affects all geographical regions. The birth of movements such as #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess) in Argentina, #NiUnaMas (#NotOneMore) in Mexico, #SayHerName in the United States, #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria and #TotalShutDown in South Africa and Kenya are a few examples that sparked global outrage and are emblematic of the persisting challenge of gender based violence as well as States' inaction to the problem.

Pregnancy-related complications remain the leading cause of death for young women and girls despite years of policy advocacy on **universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) including access to safe and legal abortion and ending harmful cultural practices**. However, from the early 2000s, it emerged from data collected by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that [suicide was the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds globally](#). This points to the strong correlation between misogyny, gender discrimination and violence and the increasingly disproportionate risks to young women, girls and particularly trans and gender non-conforming persons

With a growing diversity of powers, such as corporate actors, new forms of deadly violence have also since emerged. For example, **young women human rights defenders**, like 26-year-old Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, the daughter of the murdered Honduran indigenous and environmental leader Berta Cáceres, continue to face violent attacks as they defend the right to land of indigenous peoples and minorities. In 2018, [more than three people were murdered each week in the world](#) and an even higher number faced daily threats to their lives because of efforts to highlight and resist destruction of the environment by extractive industries and development projects on environment.

¹ Ayesha Imam, Shareen Gokal & Isabel Marler (2017) The devil is in the details: a feminist perspective on development, women's rights, and fundamentalisms, *Gender & Development*, 25:1, 15-36, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2017.1286803](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2017.1286803)

In the world of work, since the adoption of BPfA, youth labor force participation rates have declined from 55% to 46% in the past 20 years.² According to the International Labor Organization's ILO report, *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2017*³, the bulk of international migrant flows consists of young people – around 70% are younger than 30. Young women, girls and trans youth still undertake a **disproportionate number of hours on invisible, unrecognized and unpaid work on care provision and household duties**. As workers, young women, girls and trans youth still perform jobs that are most precarious and exploitative, and lowest paid. In addition to gender-based discrimination in the labor force, gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace are common and ingrained in corporate culture. Criminalization of sex work and sex workers by governments and “rescue” models persist and contribute to high levels of stigma and discrimination despite [global calls for decriminalization and legal reform](#).

Alongside youth unemployment challenges, addressing the gender gap in the workforce remains one of the most urgent labour market challenges facing the global community. Young feminists are often at the intersection of both challenges. For example, the world's attention turned to the inhumane conditions for sweatshop workers, who are [often between the ages of 15-25 years](#), when the eight-storey Rana Plaza in Bangladesh caved in ending the lives of over 1,100 workers, majority young women and girls, and causing injuries to thousands.

Furthermore, the labour market is rapidly changing due to technological advancements, innovation, automation, artificial intelligence and what is being referred to as digitally mediated labour platforms aka Sharing or Platform economy, with its new forms of labour precarity. While the **impact of new technologies and the future of work** is unknown and seems difficult to predict, what is sure is that these trends will [present unique age-related, racial and gender dimensions to grapple with](#).

Finally, is the issue of **resourcing for gender equality and women's rights** which has been an enduring challenge facing feminist and women's rights organizations. The 1995 conference increased attention paid to gender equality issues, and particularly 'The Girl Child'. Since then, women and girls have become central to development debates including a stand-alone goal in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender mainstreaming has gone beyond bureaucratic circles and development agendas. Celebrities have come out publicly in support of 'feminism' and issues that pertain to gender equality have been embraced in the mainstream media. While attention to gender equality and feminism has increased, resources that support the critical work done by feminist, women and girls' movements to secure these rights and freedoms have dwindled steadily over time.

In 2014, the **average income for young feminists groups was a paltry 5000 USD per year**, with at least a quarter of the groups working with under USD 500 per year. According to [Brave, Creative & Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organizing](#), the average income for young feminists groups in 2014 was **5000 USD per year**, with at least 25% of respondents working with under \$500 per year. None of the groups interviewed received funds from bilateral or multilateral agencies, national governments. Upon probing on possible reasons for the funding gap, over one third of the survey respondents highlighted that the **funding challenges are related to a lack of alignment between funders and their priority issues**.

² International Labour Organization (ILO) (2017), *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2017: Paths to a better working future*, International Labour Office, Geneva.

³ Ibid

Notably, new actors focusing on development and philanthropy, such as corporate actors, are not always driven by a rights-based agenda as evidenced in a research from “[The State of Funding for Girls](#)” which points to the fact that nearly 90% of 103 grants totaling \$137 M from private sector funders was geared towards education. Some of the challenges highlighted with funding interventions from new actors include that they are often highly focused on the individual as opposed to addressing systemic failures, single-issue focused and lack a broader rights perspective and exclude women’s rights organisations and movements that are on the frontlines in challenging gender inequalities⁴.

The State of Young Feminist Organizing: Times have changed & so have we

Young feminists are on the frontlines of critical struggles of our time and building on transnational solidarity to safeguard progress from the past, propose new ways of living and being and co-create the world they want. From [#WhiteWednesdays campaign in Iran](#) denouncing the compulsory wearing of hijab to the [Caribbean #LifeinLeggings](#) movement to end sexual and gender based violence, the power of young feminists organising is visible across the globe. The increasing prominence of digital technologies has no doubt facilitated mobilization in powerful ways but young feminist organizing is not only limited to online spaces. In seeking deeply transformative – radical – changes, young feminists are present in numerous collective spaces. They are resisting the patriarchal systems in the contexts that they live in where oppressions and rights violations are still very much prevalent.

A few examples are illustrative of young women, girls and trans youth who are driven to action by the world they live in today where, the language and theory of feminism may be well established but the expectations of feminist ideals based on their lived realities do not match. From [Haus of Khameleon, young transgender women in Fiji](#), advancing trans equality rights and climate justice in the Pacific, to young feminists advocating for policy change on [restrictive abortion laws in El Salvador](#), using activism to reclaim public space like the [Femicletas in Oaxaca](#) and [murals of The Fearless Collective](#), to [Women in Martial Arts \(WIMA\) in Kiribati practising self defence](#), to [HOLAA! a Pan-Africanist digital platform](#) working to create a collective safe space to share on sex, sexuality and pleasure to [Kohl a young feminist led publishing house](#) decolonising knowledge by promoting multilingual, open access and peer reviewed knowledge; from Montreal’s [Rock Camp for Girls and Gender Non-conforming Youth \(RCFG*\) between the ages of 10 and 17 learning about ableism](#) to Kenya’s ‘[Faces of Diversity](#)’ which advances disability rights by challenging stereotypes and cultural norms around disability, gender and sexuality as well as societal ideas of beauty and [FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund](#) resourcing bold and powerful young feminist organising across the globe.

In addition to the shift of political landscape, young feminists demands, strategies and achievements have been shaped by intrinsic movement building dynamics. While, young feminists are not a homogenous group or one movement and have multiple and often intersecting identities, being ‘young’ presents some commonality of experience particularly in how they are perceived when trying to access spaces, secure resources and influence political agendas.

First, this has seen young feminist organisers shift from NGO-ization to more nascent organisational structures that involve non-linear growth model and non-traditional styles of leadership. According to

⁴ Miller, J., Arutyunova, A., Clark, C., & AWID. (2013). *New actors, new money, new conversations. A mapping of recent initiatives for women and girls*. AWID.

[Brave, Creative & Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organizing](#), 46% of young feminists reported their organisations as unregistered. This is based on the fact that the present young generation is organising in times of shrinking civic space, shrinking resources and security-related threats from fascists and fundamentalists including governments. Examples range from Members of Parliament (MPs) publicly shaming activists in [Lebanon](#), young women being blamed for their own femicide in [Mexico](#), or young feminist activists being detained or forced underground in [China](#). It is important to appreciate that the choices young feminists take are in view of resisting democratic systems and development agendas that are not working for them and pursuing change that is politically radical, more meaningful to their lives and sustainable for their organizing.⁵

Secondly, all these experiments have an impact on how young feminists resource for their work. The same report highlights that a majority of young feminist groups today draw their resources from crowdsourcing and self-generated income activities (including membership fees). This signals a generation of young feminists who are shifting from donor dependency syndrome and seek to remain deeply political with their approach to resources. Here is a generation of young feminists that is questioning the increasing focus on 'investing in the girl child' and 'harnessing the demographic dividend' supported by economic arguments as this only lends itself to the increasing instrumentalization and commodification of labor. The resourcing vision being one that centers young women, girls and trans youth as subjects of rights and not as strategy to improve economic performance. For a lot of young feminists today, resources are a core part of claiming their collective power and questioning systematic oppression.

Beijing spirit lives on and remains urgent!

Today's generation of young people is the largest the world has seen with approximately half of the world's more than 3.5 billion, under the age of 25⁶ This means that half of the current world's population was non-existent at the time of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Young feminists are active and key constituencies impacting social change for the realization of rights and justice around the world. The Beijing Review Processes in 2020 provides an opportunity for women, girls, trans youth and gender non-conforming persons to reflect of 25 years of mobilizing for gender justice at policy levels, but crucially, to deliberate over political efforts that will advance multigenerational feminist ways of working so as to safeguard gains.

We need to acknowledge that age is a strong factor based on which power is shared or expressed and though transitory has been used as an avenue to oppress groups. This has manifested differently in organizing circles ranging from [who gets to occupy certain spaces to whose voice carries greater weight in certain conversations/dialogues](#). There is need to counter patronizing approaches towards young feminists that take place within feminist movement and organizations, where they are often recipients of 'capacity building' rather than advocates and leaders in their own right. In the same breath, young feminists need a safe space to be vulnerable, build their capacities, connect and build collective power. This would mean young people are genuinely and meaningfully engaged as actors of change not because they are the future but because they are the 'now'!

⁵ Devi Leiper O'Malley & Ruby Johnson (2018) A young feminist new order: an exploration of why young feminists organise the way they do, *Gender & Development*, 26:3, 533-550, DOI: [10.1080/13552074.2018.1526370](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2018.1526370)

⁶ AL Hanna (2015), *The Global Youth Unemployment Crisis*, Duke University. p.2

Multigenerational leadership is essential to the life of movements –through the creation of a pipeline of leaders, diversification of voices, perspectives and deepening inclusivity. A multigenerational feminist way of working doesn't just happen because we have a common vision or theoretical understanding of its importance. It happens when there are deliberate political efforts to change the ways of working.

Conclusion

Since 1995, it is clear that the systemic crisis has deepened and expanded characterized by a financial crisis; extreme poverty and widening inequalities; youth unemployment; rollback of rights; humanitarian crises, weakening of social protection systems and public services; and ecocide just to name a few. Young feminists recognize that the current political moment is a continuation of histories of patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and domination; things that our ancestors imagined would be a thing of the past but are present today and emboldened. On the other hand, transphobia and homophobia, exclusion of sex workers, reproduction of racism, ageism, classism, ableism, neoliberal feminism are some of the persisting challenges we face within and across feminist movements.

Over the years, feminist and women's rights movements worldwide have articulated the intersectional nature of the pressing challenges we face and made better connections across differentiated identities for collective justice and solidarity. It is not enough to shift power in patriarchal contexts that we live in but there is need to interrogate the unity of our movements and continuously strive to build collective power. Intersectional organizing is the only way to realize Beijing's visionary potential for effective solidarity and transformative change needed to achieve gender, economic and environmental justice. Intergenerational justice must be part and parcel of all our pursuits for human rights, freedom and liberation from all oppression.