

Standpoint: The politics of being “young”: is a “youth” category really necessary for “development”?

Rishita Nandigiri

The *idea* of “youth” is usually bandied about with ease, homogenising an already mostly arbitrary social construct. Youth are often, depending on context and speaker, described in any number of ways ranging from apathetic to politically conscious game changers (typically referencing the so-called Arab Spring), a demographic dividend to a potentially dangerous youth bulge, from needing their innocence protected to wildly promiscuous with no moral compass. No matter where or how one places youth on a spectrum of understanding, there is general consensus that “youth issues” need tackling.

Beyond a constantly shifting age limit, there’s no agreed universal concept of who exactly is youth and why. The United Nations defines “youth” as those between 15 and 24 years of age, adolescents as between 10-19 years, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines ‘children’ as persons up to the age of 18 (United Nations, 2011). To add to the confusion, age-based definitions are different regionally and from country to country. The African Youth Charter defines youth as 15-35 (African Union, 2006). The National Youth Policy in South Africa defines youth as those between 14 and 35 years of age (National Youth Commission, 1997), the Kenyan National Youth Policy uses 15-30 as a marker (Ministry of Home Affairs, Heritage and Sports, 2002), and in Nigeria youth are defined as those between 18 and 35 (The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, 2001). All the confusion is further compounded by throwing the term “young people” into the mix, functioning as a catch-all for adolescents and youth between 10-24 years of age¹.

Youth as a demographic

There are several practical explanations for why age is used to demarcate when it comes to youth²; but most centre on the implications of demographics and statistics on programmes and policies. Given that there are over 1.8 billion young people in the world today, 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries, where they tend to make up a large proportion of the population³ most development and population interventions focus on youth.

With the commemoration of the 7th billion person in the world in October 2011, there was a resurgence of ideology from the 1970s. One such insidious theory, that specifically targets the autonomies, rights, and lives of young people – and especially those from the Global South – is the ‘youth bulge’ theory. The youth bulge theory posits that as this generation of young people enter the workforce, they will either help their nations move forward (as demographic dividends—another problematic term) or due to the lack of opportunities, the unemployment rates will grow, leading a huge number of unemployed young people – particularly young men – to violent and socially destructive acts. It also links to young people entering their reproductive lives – putting a huge emphasis for governments on controlling young people’s fertility and reproductive decision-making. Again, the brunt of this policy overwhelmingly impacts young women’s bodies and lives.

The youth bulge theory has gained support for compelling governments to focus on employment opportunities and job creation—both of which are much needed. However, these policies and initiatives must not be justified using such rhetoric, and rather, must be seen within the rubric of the citizenship and rights of young people instead of due to a dangerous misconception that potentially sets up problematic programmes and approaches to youth development.

Another policy based on demographics is an ‘expansionist’ framework that is increasingly evident in societies with declining population rates. There has been a resurgence of pronatalist rhetoric in such countries (Russia, for example) where previously liberal laws on abortion have seen increasing resistance and even a regression to more restrictive clauses, a shift in societal bias favouring more children, and some countries even offering tax deductions and other incentives to encourage larger families.

Such theories reflect the highly problematic population control rhetoric that ceases to see populations as people, and instead reduces them to

“numbers”. It strips people—specifically youth—of their identities and views them as a particular demographic based on colour, age, job, education, citizenship; and by doing so removes any sense of autonomy, integrity, and dignity. It positions them – and therefore, any intervention – as a “body”, open to policies and programming regardless of their human rights, values or wishes. The prevailing belief that there are “too many” people in this world for the finite number of resources available (specifically in the Global South) is underscored by this viewpoint, with a polar opposite fear of entire nations being unable to support themselves due to the sheer lack of young people to sustain the economy or the rapidly aging population.

Young people in societies facing a youth bulge are seen, in a demographic sense, as being in/entering their prime reproductive years and if this is not controlled or influenced, it could lead to an unsustainable economy and therefore, society. It specifically targets the so-called “undesirable” populations and restricts their autonomies and violates their sexual and reproductive lives to sustain a system that is inherently unequal and oppressive. Again, the restrictions and violations are of young women’s sexual and reproductive lives; sustaining a system that actually removes young people, and specifically targets young women, from the centre of development and renders them passive receptacles of policies devoid of human rights and justice.

Indeed, these ugly policies are coming to the fore in discussions particularly related to Global South countries. It is held that these countries will be unable to sustain their growing populations, their economies will be overburdened by the numbers of people and therefore collapse, and their resources, already limited, will be unable to cater to the needs of their populations. As a result, these emerging countries and economies will face the burden of a society in decline. This ideology places an unfair, unwarranted, and completely unjustified burden on young peoples’ sexualities – particularly of young women, bodily integrities and autonomies; and is based on racist, xenophobic, and completely unjust ideologies.

Conversely, in countries where there is a large middle-aged population, a steadily growing aging population, and a much smaller youth population, there are grave fears of a societal collapse due to the ‘burden’ placed on the young people to support the ageing populations without a comparable “replacement” rate. Hence, there are programmes to encourage young people to have larger families, as well as policy changes to restrict access to contraceptive information, and choices.

That these theories form the basis of some interventions and policies is also linked to the ideology of dominance. If those in positions of power believe that youth populations need controlling and protection or are consistently labelled as “irresponsible” or “violent”, it limits the spaces in which youth – and young women particularly – can challenge, critique and create an alternate discourse. By excluding young people from key decision-making positions, it perpetuates a cycle of harmful policies and programming that is at best irrelevant, and at worst dangerous.

To adequately mount a challenge and shift perceptions and policies, young people need spaces to articulate their positions, needs, and realities. At this point, “youth” is no longer an artificial category; but are multiple identities that need recognition and realisation within larger facets and aspects of society, including policy interventions.

Dehomogenising “youth”

The broad range of ages covered in the definitions of youth covers a spectrum of socio-political, historical, and cultural experiences, inequalities, and identities. Oftentimes, policy and programmes refer to “youth” as a homogenous group; stripping them of their identities and contexts. One size definitely does not fit all young people. Acknowledging and understanding the diversity of “youth” and the multiple factors that influence their identities—not just in terms of age, ability, gender identity, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, sexual orientation, citizenship, culture, religious beliefs, the languages they speak and the contexts—cultural, social, political, economic, historical, religious—that they live in; but in what their experiences are, the access they have to different avenues, and the ways in which power structures are a part of their everyday lives.

Unpacking who exactly we mean by “youth” will also reflect the inequities of history and how that has consistently excluded swathes of society from access to knowledge, education, and information that is generally assumed to be the domain of “youth”. The South African National Youth Policy specifically mentions such circumstances in defence of the broad age range, “A person aged 35 years in 1997 was born in 1962 – she or he lived during a period of high political conflict, much of which was expressed in schools. Whilst a young person aged 14 years in 1997, was born in 1983, growing up when many new reforms and achievements of the struggle were being realised. Thus,

it is necessary to recognise the different life circumstances and experiences which shape those who comprise this broad age category.” (National Youth Commission, 1997)

Within this rubric of “youth”, those who are younger and older, poorer, from indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, from rural or hard-to-reach areas do not always have the same access to policy and programmatic influence as each other. The needs and realities of “youth” vary greatly, and specific interventions are needed to include them in all activities and “development” programmes.

Programmes that fail to do this, also fail to engage with young people in any real, meaningful and sustainable manner, and instead re-etch the same system. Understanding the diversity of young people means recognising their “evolving capacities”⁴. Taking into consideration the growth and progression of young peoples’ lives, capacities and decision-making skills, along with the external/contextual influences, is crucial for young peoples’ rights and for any sincere attempt at sustainable development.

Young women, perception, and categorisation

Interestingly, in my experience, using “young women” as a category is not met with as much resistance or as much controversy. Perhaps it is because rather than seeing young women as part of a “youth” space, they are subsumed into the larger spectrum of “women”. It disassociates young women from the experiences of “age-related” dominance alone, and adds another layer of structural, cultural, socio-political and historical dominance. This is not without its own complexities and contradictions, both in terms of the approach of programme and policy; but also in terms of how young women experience these spaces.

Policy and programming that particularly focuses on women and seeks to challenge the inherited and inherent models of dominance must shift perspective when working with young women’s issues and needs. This is not only because young women’s experiences differ, but also because their access to care and knowledge is controlled in a different manner. It can be argued then, that they experience violence, violation of rights, and repression in different ways that is compounded by their other identities and contexts.

It is not just a singular identity of a young woman that is subsumed, it is her other identities that are integrated into their “larger” spaces as well. While integration is important to underscore the cross-sectionality of issues, it also

cannot address the needs of a broad cross-section. Understanding that age is also a barrier – and perhaps one that erects more hurdles than others- is integral to meaningfully working with young women.

The perception of young women and their capabilities is also a factor in how young women engage in spaces and the access that they have. As I mentioned earlier, the ideology of dominance plays a huge role in how young people engage, and this has a lot to do with the perception of young people. It is not just the harmful concepts of young people as passive and apathetic that abound, but the equally dangerous ideas of young people (and this is especially in relation to young women) as victims that need protection, or as fledglings needing constant direction and supervision. These concepts lead to misguided attempts at “protecting” young people by limiting their access to knowledge and information. This is particularly true when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Under the guise of protecting innocence and “purity”, there is a strong push to limit access to comprehensive sexuality education, access to contraceptives and even safe abortion access. This is further compounded by a cultural construct of young women – how young women look, how they behave, how they speak, and importantly, how they interact with their “seniors” – that begins to limit and control their autonomy and decision-making.

The ideology of dominance in reference to young women includes women in their communities, homes, school and work spaces; amongst others. Young women’s autonomies are also limited and controlled by (generally older) women, making it difficult for generic “women’s” programmes to adequately address the power dynamics and structures that come into play inter-generationally. This is evident, not just in programming and policy, but even within the women’s and feminist movements committed to building young women’s/feminist leadership.

As Ishita Chaudry so accurately puts it, “Feminism is increasingly, for many of us, at times also an oppressive system of how power operates between women who have it, and those who don’t.” (Chaudhry, 2012) Young women and young feminist activists have to navigate a corridor of established ideologies and beliefs, a history that is handed down embroiled in politics of space and language. It can be difficult to question and to critique within such spaces. It is further compounded by the fact that formal spaces for young women’s/feminist narratives are difficult to create and sustain.

Young women's/feminist literature that analyses, theorises, and builds on the lessons of the "field" are also hard to access; making actual engagement and involvement difficult and potentially perpetuating a framework of leadership that is incongruent with not just the larger beliefs of the movement; but with the needs of it too.

Conclusion

I struggle with the question of whether "youth" should be a category by itself or if it should be part of broader constituencies – young women, young LGBTQI, young workers, young migrants. I struggle with the categorisation of "youth" and even my own position of youth as an identity. It is so in flux and so susceptible to shifts and change that it makes it extremely difficult to work and theorise on.

However, the barriers and the challenges that exist because of one's age and perceived ability (in relation to that age) are hard to argue against. The structures of power and dominance that have been long established are also difficult to deny, and they do consistently exclude young people and control their access and autonomy.

If challenging the dominance, the insidious theories and perceptions *about* young people needs to take place, then young people need to have separate and distinct spaces to understand and acknowledge their own needs, as well as strategise and actively question and challenge the dominant discourse. Politicisation and identification of their own ideologies needs space and time too. If building "future" (and present) leadership is imperative, then young peoples' realities and needs must be looked at within existing structures too- and if the structures do not have safe spaces or cannot be shifted and changed from the inside alone; then young people need to create and have access to alternate spaces.

Despite my own misgivings and struggles with how, where and why young people fit into the current development discourse and acknowledging that the current systems do not adequately address or engage young people; I do think it necessary to have a separate "category", and "identity" to question and create one's own arguments and theories; but to not look at it in isolation from other spaces – after all, identities are fluid and identities are multiple.

Endnotes

1. In this piece, “youth” and “young people” are used interchangeably.
2. The African Youth Charter is “CONVINCED that Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population and that through their active and full participation, Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead”; and recognises “that youth are partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity of Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and to future development” amongst other notes.
3. Population Division UN-DESA World Population Prospects: 2010 Revision
4. Convention on the Rights of Child

References

- African Union. 2006. *African Youth Charter*. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from African Union: http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/Text/African_Youth_Charter.pdf
- Chaudhry, I. 2012. *AWID Diaries – The uncomfortable self-examination of a young woman’s leadership*. Retrieved November 18, 2012, from Young Feminist Wire: <http://yfa.awid.org/2012/10/awid-diaries-the-uncomfortable-self-examination-of-a-young-woman%E2%80%99s-leadership/>
- Ministry of Home Affairs, Heritage and Sports. 2002. *Kenya National Youth Policy*. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from Youth Policy: <http://www.youth-policy.com/Policies/Kenya%20National%20Youth%20Policy.pdf>
- National Youth Commission. 1997. *National Youth Policy*. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from Policy, Law, Economics and Politics – Deepening Democracy through Access to Information: <http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/policy/intro.html>
- The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development. 2001. *National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action*. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from Youth Policy: <http://www.youth-policy.com/Policies/Nigeria%20National%20Youth%20Policy%20&%20Plan%20of%20Action.pdf>
- United Nations. 2011. *Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved November 7, 2012, from Youth: Social Policy and Development Division: <http://social.un.org/index/Youth/FAQs.aspx>