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A Generation Defined

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Imagining Ourselves: A Global Generation of Women
International Museum of Women



A Generation Defined

Younger generations today have been described as apathetic, self-absorbed, and oblivious to the world's larger problems. Recent college graduates in the U.S. are characterized as nightmares in the workplace, exhibiting a strong sense of entitlement without a requisite work ethic.

I have a different story to tell. I spent the last six years working with the International Museum of Women, talking to women in their twenties and thirties around the world. I talked to thousands of young women personally—and, by virtue of our *Imagining Ourselves* project, interacted with close to a million more. What I found is that these negative descriptions are far from the truth—and, in fact, missing huge pieces of the puzzle.

Every generation has something that they fight for. What's different for today's young women is that their fight isn't limited to a specific issue. Yes, they are actively concerned about huge problems our world faces—the environment, domestic violence, and reproductive health being prime among them. But this is a generation of women that grew up being told by their mothers and fathers that they could do anything they wanted in the world. They not only believed it, they learned to *expect* such things of themselves. What unites this generation then, and the cause that they are fighting for, is a more personal struggle. They are fighting to manifest their own potential in the world.

Who we talked to:

The following account is drawn from over six years of interaction with hundreds of thousands of young women globally. In 2001, we first sent out a call for submissions, asking women in their twenties and thirties around the world to respond to the question, "*What Defines Your Generation of Women?*" From more than 3,000 written and visual responses from more than 100 countries, we created an online exhibition and book—and invited the rest of the world to join in the conversation. In total, more than a million people from 222 countries participated in this global conversation.

It is important to note, however, that our results do not represent all segments of this generation of women. There are a billion women between the ages of 20-40; a large number live in poverty¹, presumably disconnected from luxuries like the internet. These were not, for better or worse, the women we talked to. The million plus young women who participated in our programs were by in large of the middle classes—educated young women with internet access—from a segment of society that has benefited most from globalization and demographic shifts of the past few decades. While this large and growing demographic represents a significant segment of their generation (and one might claim their experiences are leading indicators for what's to come), they do not represent the entire world, nor do our results.

The Top Four Characteristics of Young Women Today:

1. Border-Crossers:

Elda Stanco is globalization's poster child. Now in her early thirties, Elda is a professor of Spanish literature at Hollins University in Virginia. She grew up in Venezuela and Italy and has been in the United States since college. When asked what defines her generation of

young women, she speaks of a group of dynamic and empowered peers who cannot be classified by their nationality—women who eat ceviche one day and an Indian curry the next...women who are of mixed heritage or perhaps hold dual passports...and above all, women who can not possibly answer the question, “*Where are you from?*” without an explanation that lasts at least half an hour.

Among women in her age group, Elda’s perspective is not unique. Women in their twenties and thirties today are the first generation that can truly be called global— connected to the rest of the world by technology, media and travel.

This is a generation that came of age as the internet, the fastest spreading technology in the history of the world, transformed communication, enabling the speedy exchange of information across national (and other geographical) boundaries. Many estimates show that over 20 percent of women between the ages of twenty and forty have regular internet access— a figure that is rapidly growing. Indeed, the majority of internet users in countries like the United States and Canada are womenⁱⁱ.

This is also a generation of women who have taken increased advantage of mobility made available to them through the greater accessibility of leisure travel to countries and regions outside their home. Eighty percent of travel decisions in the United States, for example, are made by womenⁱⁱⁱ, and women constitute close to 50 percent of business travelers in the United States^{iv}. But such travel is not limited to women from North America. For example, Alla Nitsenko from Russia writes:

“After Soviet Union collapsed, and the world became opened for us, I visited Paris, Prague, Budapest, Rome, Venice, Milano, Croatia, Slovakia, Canary Islands, and Egypt. The whole world has become closer for me. I started to study foreign languages (English and Italian), so I could communicate with different people. I think that the women of my generation are more opened to other people cultures than our mothers and grandmothers were. My mother lived in a socialist country with successfully developed science and technology, but the world was divided into two camps that time. Neither my grandmother, not my mom could not visit other countries except for Eastern Europe. They didn’t need to know foreign languages.”

The result of such increased mobility and interchange between cultures is that many young women today are also confused about their national and ethnic identities. Overwhelmingly, young women reported feeling as if they were ‘between’ cultures— caught between the country of their residence and countries of ethnic origin or personal affiliation. Farheen Haq, a Canadian of South Asian Muslim descent, writes of the confusion of always feeling “away from home,” regardless of where she is located in the world. Alexandra Whaley of New Zealand writes about her peers having identities both as New Zealanders *and* as part of a larger global community.

Indeed, young women from almost all corners of the world are actively creating blended cultures— embracing the mixing of food, media, and even the ideas from countries far and wide. Mishka Moujabber’s words capture this spirit beautifully. Mishka is half Greek and half Lebanese, spent her first 10 years in Egypt, lived in Lebanon till age 15, moved to Australia till age 20, and then moved back to Lebanon. She writes, “by the time I was back in Lebanon, (I was) finally comfortable in an identity which was above all Lebanese, but which embraced all the other influences—Greek, Egyptian, Australian—that were so intimately part of me.”

2. Breaking Boundaries

The Public Sphere

More young women today have attended high school and college than any generation in history—by leaps and bounds. In 2002 and 2003, over 80 percent of girls worldwide were enrolled in primary school^v, and the gender disparity in primary school enrollment has dramatically shrunk in recent decades. Further, in the Caribbean, Western Asia, the United States, and many parts of Western Europe, women now outnumber men in higher education^{vi}.

They are also leaders in the workplace. More young women are formally employed now, and command more power and responsibility, than ever before. Between 1993 and 2003, over 200 million women entered formal employment globally^{vii}. Women today represent 70 percent of the workforce in developed countries and 60 percent in developing countries are engaged in paid employment^{viii}. While huge pay differences and inequalities still remain, women are charting new territories in their roles in public and professional life. They have started their own businesses and non-profit organizations. They are charting new territory as journalists, store managers, graphic designers, teachers, lawyers, and so on—and take great pride in pushing these boundaries.

Nasra Abubakar from Somalia works as a journalist in Nairobi. The daughter of a camel farmer, she was the first woman in her family to go to college—like so many women of her generation in East Africa. A professional working mother, she juggles the demands of her job with what she describes as a traditional Muslim marriage, and one in which she is responsible for the bulk of the housework. “My generation of women is called the unmanageable ones (sic),” she writes, “because we are working mothers who are trying our best to be independent.”

The Private Sphere

The pushing of boundaries does not just occur in public life; it occurs in private life as well. In response to our question, “*What defines your generation of women?*” many women around the world spoke of new trends in terms of dating and courtship—from internet dating to the increase in domestic partnerships that avoid formal marriage.

Chinese painter Shen Ling sent us a series of intimate painted portraits in explicitly urban scenes from Beijing and Shanghai, depicting young women exploring dating and sexuality. According to Shen, the idea of being able to seek pleasure in one’s romantic life—especially before marriage—is a relatively new idea for young Chinese urbanites but an increasingly common exploration for women of her generation.

Sadaf Siddique, of India, talks in a similar vein of the new trend of ‘assisted marriage’ being created by young women and men in urban centers in South Asia. A modern twist on the traditional practice of arranged marriage, today’s matchings increasingly involve decision-making from *both* parents and children. They are not quite arranged marriages, nor pure love marriages; rather, Sadaf comments, they are ‘assisted’ marriages, and they are becoming increasingly common^{ix}.

3. Too Many Choices?

*“I am Muslim, and one of those multi faceted visual artists (costume design for fiction/ Photography/Video/ documentary production). I live in Dakar the capital city of Senegal. And I am a pure product of this new generation. A generation of professionals, career and family driven young women because the context they live in allows it fully, travelers, creators, you name it we got it. We are great lovers of nature, spiritual vibrations, and developing our nations. **Women my generation want to be daughters, sisters, women, wives, mothers and great lovers, we really want it all.**”*

-Fatou Kande Senghor, Senegal (emphasis mine)

As the gates are thrown open to new opportunities, young women are overwhelmed and confused by the tremendous number of choices they face—from a huge array of career options to their ability to create alternative lifestyles. On the one hand, young women like Fatou (above) greatly appreciate the variety of doors open to them, and express their desire to take advantage of all of these opportunities. On the other hand, many of the same women feel tremendous pressure to do just that—often feeling inadequate because they are not able to do everything all at once. Ironically, the more doors that are opened to young women, the more difficult it is for some of them to choose a specific path and leave other potential options behind. To this end, Giada Ripa di Meana comments:

“I am in my late twenties, approaching thirty. I have been able not only to learn many different languages and to travel thoroughly around the world but to explore education and academic systems in four different countries. ...Nonetheless, this openness and access to unlimited options (geographical, urban, professional, creative, romantic, etc.,) has thrown me, as well as many other women of my generation, into a difficult decision-making position. I feel that women in their late twenties have been experiencing both strength and confusion—an inner identity quest that is tearing them apart.”

Rachel Alouise Mould from the United Kingdom comments in a similar vein:

“I think the greatest challenge that women of this generation face is having too many choices. There is an idea that we should be everything: a career woman, a mother, an athlete, a well-read and interesting person, someone who also volunteers and advocates for rights on our spare time. When our foremothers fought for the right to work outside the home there was a strong polarization of women who worked and those who did not. Now women are meant to do it all and somehow succeed easily. It is the generation of the super woman. And she must be tired.”

A particular fault-line in this regard falls on the question of creating families and having children. The challenge of juggling work and family is not a new one, but as more and more women enter the formal workforce, the question takes on new shades and variations.

Statistics tell us that young women today are getting married later and having dramatically fewer children. Globally, the average age of women at first marriage in 1970 was 21.4; by 2000, it had risen to 25.5^x. Further, in almost all Western and former Soviet countries, the birth rate is now below the replacement level^{xi}. And the trend of having fewer children is not limited to the west. For example, in the 1980's, when researchers asked young women in Peru how many children they wanted to have, the average answer was 3.8. Just one decade later, in the 1990's, that number dropped to 2.5^{xii}.

Although young women enjoy greater freedom to choose if, when, and how to have children, many young women feel inadequate about whatever decisions they make in this regard. Some women who are part of the so-called ‘drop out revolution’ (by which young women are supposedly leaving the professional world to focus exclusively on family), have commented on our exhibition that they are upset by society's estimation of them as ‘less’ because they are not out there earning money.

Women who make the opposite decision—focusing on career over family—often feel the converse pressure. Lucia Etxebarria, a famous Spanish author, writes the story of a young businesswoman who has achieved great wealth and success at the cost of her personal and romantic life. When her 30th birthday rolls around and she spends it alone, she painfully questions whether her choice has been the right one. Indeed, while today's young women have a greater range of choices than ever before possible when it comes to questions of reproduction—they seem to still be coming to terms with the tradeoffs that any of their range of choices will entail.

4. A Positive Attitude

Young women today are bold, creative, mobile, and confident. They will tell you that the world is far more open to them now than it was for their mothers and grandmothers. They believe that anything is possible for them. They are a generation raised on the ideology of personal empowerment—and their actions and attitudes show it.

Jessica Loseby, in England, is a disabled mother of three. This is something that was unthinkable for disabled women even just a generation ago—but Jessica has courageously chosen to defy convention. She writes:

“Had my disability happened to my mother (in the unlikely event that she could have survived it), her life would have been one of separation and institutions. Parenthood would have been unthinkable; routine sterilization of disabled women continued until relatively recently. However, women with disabilities all over the world are starting to say, ‘I can’ — and their children agree.”

Such a no-holds barred attitude extends itself from the personal to the public sphere. Take for example, Mayerly Sanchez, who, at the age of 14, in the midst of Colombia’s civil war, had the idea to organize youth against the violence—and she did. She orchestrated a historic national vote in which thousands of kids and teenagers across the country went to the polls to make a highly televised statement against the violence. And one month later, as a result, millions of adult Colombians also went to the polls to demand an end to forced kidnapping and abuses of children associated with the war.

Mayerly did not grow up as an elite member of her society. She did not have access to extraordinary wealth or networks of privilege. She was simply a young woman with a good idea who did not stop to question the proposition that she could make a difference in the world. And while Mayerly’s story is certainly exceptional, it embodies a spirit that was common to so many young women we talked with. Defying stereotypes, today’s young women are not apathetic about the world’s problems; to the contrary, they are actively concerned.

However, instead of channeling their energy into protests, young women today are more likely to focus on smaller level individual and community interventions. Many, like Mayerly, will start or join the ranks of one of the tens of thousands of non-profit and voluntary organizations that have exploded into existence globally in the past four decades. Others, like Priya Haji, may choose to start their own socially-responsible businesses. Priya, an Indian-American, started a corporation called World of Good, which imports fair-trade handicrafts into the US market.

The attitude is one that is interested in solutions. Rather than focusing on what’s wrong, many young women would rather focus on creating what’s right—and expanding opportunities in that direction. Marama Davidson, a Maori human rights activist from New Zealand, sums this up beautifully, in talking about her personal life.

“My parents faced blatant opposition, outright hatred, violence, and mass racism. These things still exist today but in ways far more institutionalized than ever. But ... I choose to ignore that fact. I instead make good use of the opportunities that are available to me as a young Māori woman. I took part in a four-week-long kayaking voyage that retraced the traditional waterways of my tūpuna [ancestors]. I have been on climbing expeditions to summit snowy Tongariro and Ngauruhoe mountains. I modeled in the Pasifika Fashion Show, which has become a first-class professional performance. I have scaled cliffs in rock climbing expeditions to Northland and Waikato. I embarked on study at the Auckland University as a teenage mother. I work with pride and passion at the Human Rights Commission, where I strive to affect the lives of people every day. I am proud of all of that.”

Conclusion:

The outlook and life-choices of most young women in their twenties and thirties today are shaped by drastic demographic changes that have taken place in the last several decades. Compared to their mothers and grandmothers, young women the world over are marrying later, and having far fewer children. Further, while large economic inequalities between men and women still remain, young women are entering the workforce in record numbers, continuing a trend started by previous generations. Finally, the lives of young women have been marked by drastic increases in global interconnectivity, caused by communications technologies such as the internet and greater ease of international travel.

As a result, this generation can be defined by four main characteristics. They are: (1) global in outlook; (2) proud of pushing boundaries in both their personal and public lives; (3) confused by the huge variety of options and life-paths available to them; and above all, (4) have a positive, can-do approach to tackling challenges—whether they be the world’s problems, or their own personal problems.

In the spirit of this positive attitude, I conclude with the words of Prudence Nobantu Mabele, from South Africa. An HIV-positive activist, Prudence has dedicated her life to stopping further spread of the devastating epidemic, as well as championing the rights of the many young women in her country who are already HIV positive. We asked Prudence to tell us what defines her generation of women—and one might reasonably expect her response to focus on the mountains of challenges that she and her cohort face. Instead, here is a poignant excerpt what Prudence answered:

“What defines my generation are the young women of diverse backgrounds who have a bit of everything — like culture, religion, an outgoing attitude, education, and spirituality. I define myself as one of these women, and HIV/AIDS will not stop me from achieving my goals and inspiring others to reach theirs.”

ⁱ The site Internet World Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>) estimates that as of September 2007, just under 20% of the world population has internet access. While it is difficult to come by global data for internet usage that is broken down in terms of usage by age group, it is safe to assume that it is highly concentrated among younger generations, following patterns for most countries in which age disaggregated data is available. In all likelihood, the percentage of women in their 20s and 30s with internet access globally is actually well above 20 percent.

ⁱⁱ Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, Technology Facts and Figures. <http://www.learningpartnership.org/resources/facts/technology>

ⁱⁱⁱ Marybeth Bond, The Gutsy Traveler. www.gutsytraveler.com/mbbStatistics.html

^{iv} Connie Glazer, “Women are Changing how America Works,” July 11, 2005.

http://www.bizjournals.com/bizwome/consultants/winning_at_work/2005/07/11/column78.html

^v UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). 2005. *Global Education Digest 2005*

^{vi} United Nations Statistical Division, “The Worlds Women 2000: Main Findings and Future Directions,” <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/products/indwm/overview.htm>

^{vii} “Global Employment Trends for Women 2004,” International Labour Office, March 2004, <http://kilm.ilo.org/GET2004/DOWNLOAD/trendsw.pdf,pp.2-3>.

^{viii} www.ilo.org/public/english/region/eurpro/budapest/download/womenwork.pdf -

^{ix} Sadaf Siddique became an employee of I.M.O.W. in 2006, although she wrote this story about ‘alternate marriages’ before she was an employee.

^x State of the World’s Population Report 2004, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), www.unfpa.org/swp/swpmain.htm

^{xi} “The World’s Women, 2000: Trends and Statistics” (New York: United Nations, 2000), p. 35

^{xii} *ibid*, p. 31