

**World YWCA:
Working Internationally to Promote Women-Led Social Change
(1855-2009)**

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Florence Masuliya is a 26 year old woman in Uganda. Like so many of the millions of women of the YWCA she has been both a beneficiary and service provider of the organization, illustrating its commitment and dedication to young women's leadership development. This is her story:

In 2003, I was bedridden and weighed 25kg. After going through HIV and AIDS counselling with a YWCA community worker, I decided to go for an HIV test and the results came back HIV positive. It took three months of continuous counselling, comforting and encouragement to be strong and confident before I came to terms with my status. Even though it was difficult, I was not discouraged but instead decided to join hands with YWCA youth in fighting the spread of HIV and AIDS among our peers. Being born in the Bwaise, Saint Francis, a slum area of Kampala city, with 17,000 inhabitants, and highly burdened by HIV and AIDS, I know the living standards of women and girls. Many young girls join street sex workers in order to meet their material and financial needs. In order to respond to the needs of young people in my community, I founded Tusitukirewamu (united we stand) YWCA youth club. I have good support from the programme officer and the youth coordinator. The YWCA helped to register the club as a CBO according to Ugandan laws. Realising that sex work can place women in situations that lead to HIV and AIDS, Tusitukirewamu started sensitising this group of young girls about HIV and AIDS. Most of them are young mothers between the age of 15-25. Currently, we have a team of about 70 sex workers in the youth club and through the YWCA we offer training in vocational skills to help them identify different avenues of earning an income (Global Coalition of Women and AIDS, 2008).

INTRODUCTION

World YWCA is a global network of Young Women's Christian Associations that are currently active in 122 countries and is the largest of its kind. For over 150 years the YWCA has worked towards a better understanding of the particularities of feminist struggle while successfully mobilizing women around the universal nature of their needs, rights and desires. World YWCA seeks to promote positive social change by empowering women around the world through connecting its members to social, political and economic resources, while training them to be successful leaders and activists. It promotes a strong appreciation for self determination, diversity, and integrity, and it

relies on international partnerships to advance its vision: “a fully inclusive world where justice, peace, health, human dignity, freedom and care for the environment are promoted and sustained through women’s leadership.” In 1955 the global theme for YWCA was ‘Towards One World.’ This promotion of a unified global community is echoed through the work of YWCA members and volunteers as they strive for improvement in the rights of women everywhere and the welfare of all. According to -Susan Brennan, World YWCA President, "We are a movement that stands for social change, a movement which grows leaders, gives voice to women, meets community needs, responds to crisis, builds solidarity across borders, stands up for women’s rights, and challenges injustice."

This umbrella organization reaches millions of people each year and has been a founding leader in the global women’s rights movement. The first to chair an international conference on women, World YWCA has played a major role in influencing the United Nations (UN) to take a more vested interest in women’s rights and has helped to direct the UN’s priorities regarding these rights. It has been granted consultative status with the UN and its leaders chaired the three international conventions held in conjunction with the Decade for Women. Beyond its extensive involvement in international social welfare advocacy, the YWCA has a long and extensive history of providing relief and material resources to women and their families throughout the world.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The history of the YWCA goes back to mid 19th century Britain amidst the mounting pressures of the industrial revolution. Massive technological innovations led to women and children entering the workforce in extraordinary numbers as Britain became a manufacturing nation. Rapid expansion coupled with an intensified desire to cut costs and increase profits led to neglectful health and safety standards in the workplace. Workers were granted few rights, leading to an increased need for protection and advocacy, especially in the area of housing.

Concerned for the general decline of woman and children’s welfare and rights, two British women decided to organize women against the demeaning forces of industrial life. Mary Jane Kinnaird, a dedicated women’s rights activist, and Emma Robarts, the leader of a local prayer union began to organize young Christian women to promote public awareness of the growing issues and to advocate for women and their needs in political and economic arenas. While the organization never emphasized religious singularity or used religious identity as a qualifying factor for support, early work was “inspired by the Christian values of people who saw the need to extend their responsibilities beyond their circle of family and friends” (Our History, 2009).

As more local women’s organizations began connecting with one another and forming a network of activists with a common vision the rights, health and prosperity of women became the focal point of the YWCA. Voluntary boards of directors around the world developed local efforts. Various secretaries were employed by the boards in roles of teachers and social workers. The aim was to provide women with a holistic response to their needs. Shelter for women and young girls was the initial response, but soon the YWCA was expanding into vocational training clubs, sex education counseling and

classes, and fundraisers for the poor. They provided young women with resources to meet their basic needs (e.g. food and clothing) as well as support in finding work and advocating for their labor rights.

The YWCA model of organizing and responding to women's needs quickly spread throughout Western Europe and North America where national associations were formed to govern local groups, support the funding of local efforts and to connect YWCAs from various regions to support the transfer of knowledge, intervention styles, and resources. By 1894 the YWCAs operating in the US, Norway, and Sweden had formed ties with those in Great Britain, officially forming the World YWCA. London was home to the first World YWCA headquarters, which later relocated to Geneva in 1930. The turn of the century was a very active time for the organization. As the western world became an established arena for the organization, YWCAs began forming elsewhere in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific. Local and national YWCAs popped up throughout the world such as in India, China, Argentina, and Lebanon.

In 1898 YWCA members and activists from 17 different countries convened at the organizations first international conference to address women's global issues. These international meetings have continued to the present, acting as a significant venue for empowering women, fund development and raising awareness. International conferences, committees and commissions regularly convene around the world to discuss specific women's issues from labor rights to AIDS, developing strategies for the association, and sponsoring community-building training programs related to building membership, forming new associations and building stronger networks with one another.

PROGRAMS AND PRIORITIES

The unifying theme of YWCAs around the world is their common belief in peace, justice, freedom, and the dignity for all people. These core values drive the diverse work of the organization and have strongly influenced the international priorities established by the organization at the 1999 World YWCA Council in Egypt. The three main goals of the organization are: 1) leadership development, 2) advocacy and services, and 3) good governance and accountability. Recognizing the increased challenges and opportunities of the global era World YWCA has focused its energy and resources on specific issues that are negatively affecting the empowerment and welfare of women around the world. The following are World YWCAs major priorities along with descriptions of YWCA programs around the world.

Women's Health HIV and AIDS

Currently HIV and AIDS awareness and prevention is World YWCA's leading campaign. Determined to end the pandemic that is taking thousands of lives each day and one increasingly feminized, the coalition has worked to: 1) raise awareness, 2) produce educational resources, 3) open centers that provide services for those affected by HIV and AIDS, 4) train community leaders that will be effective promoters of HIV and AIDS prevention, 5) compile extensive research and information to disseminate (including information on programs and policies), and 6) work in alliance with the United Nations

and the International Community of Women Living with Aids (ICW) to address the issue. In 2002 at a World YWCA Executive Committee meeting it was agreed that it would focus on establishing programs around the world that would tackle the spread of HIV and AIDS (e.g. life skills training for youth, preventative health care, and anti-poverty efforts).

In 2007 World YWCA and ICW co-chaired the International Women's Summit on HIV and AIDS in Nairobi, Kenya attended by over 2000 women from over 100 nationalities that included workshops on best practices related to prevention, policy and advocacy. In 2008, World YWCA submitted a statement to the UN advocating for the elimination of HIV and AIDS stating it would require the inclusion of women in change efforts, the prevention of violence and abuse against women, as well as the eradication of discrimination and stigma for those affected by HIV and AIDS.

The Uganda case vignette of Florence noted earlier is just one of thousands of women affected by HIV and AIDS who are not only receiving support from the organization but also using their own strengths and wisdom to serve others suffering or at risk under the name of the YWCA. In Namibia, where a significant portion of the population is infected, hundreds of young women and girls have been trained by one another to teach other girls about women's health and preventive measures. This not only serves as a useful means of dissemination but fosters female empowerment and leadership. The YWCA of Tanzania has created a health education program in the region most affected by HIV and AIDS. It includes the development of awareness raising materials, along with training, peer education, and collaboration with other organizations.

World Peace and Justice

Global peace and justice have been another leading priority of organization based on the reality that women and children are disproportionately affected by war, violence, and persecution. In fact many YWCAs have emerged in the wake of large-scale atrocities, such as the YWCA Rwanda formed in 1995. The YWCA reports that women and children "make up an estimated 80 percent of the 50 million refugees and displaced people worldwide." These organizations have provided extensive relief through providing food and other basic necessities, they have provided shelter and refugee services, and have worked to disseminate information through vast networks of storytelling and reporting. These organizations also advocate for the rights of women and children during wartime, the reduction of armed conflict and the eradication of persecution.

War relief and postwar reconstruction after WWII also played a pivotal role in emphasizing women-led peace. A major delegation to occupied Japan in 1947 opened the eyes of western YWCA activists to the gendered and oppressive nature of the international political arena, then dominated by the US. This influenced a more concerted effort towards transnational collaboration and global awareness building.

In response to the recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Gaza, World YWCA has called upon the United Nations to take a more active role in addressing the conditions in Gaza created by the recent conflict by providing support for Palestinian women. World YWCA

has responded to the call for support and has joined other organizations in the pursuit of peace in the region. In Jordan, for example, it has developed counseling programs, childcare centers, skills training and employment opportunities for Palestinian refugees. In Liberia, the YWCA's 'Skills Training Resource Project for Internally Displaced' provides young women displaced by civil war with support and leadership development services.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development was declared a major priority of World YWCA in 1999 because advancing the education and status of women is crucial to long-lasting, successful development. The organization has put enormous amounts of resources into the advancement of women and girl's education and status. Literacy programs in Nairobi, Kenya; large scale vocational training in Yaounde, Cameroon; and general aid through the distribution of livestock in Accra, Ghana are just a few of the YWCA development projects. YWCA Lebanon has also responded to female employment and financial attainment by offering a variety of services related to vocational training and job mobility. In Rwanda, the Integrated Fish Farming and Bee Keeping Projects funded through the World YWCA have effectively trained women in new farming methods.

Human Rights

The human rights of women are central to the values of the YWCA. Realizing the many barriers to full attainment of such rights due to gender, racial and ethnic discrimination, World YWCA has been working tirelessly to get women into international discussions of human rights and social development. Every incorporated YWCA has been called upon to educate women on the issue of human rights. For example, in Nairobi, Kenya the organization has created vocational training programs for women where they can learn valuable trade skills as well as information on what their rights are and how to use them. It has also held workshops to raise awareness around domestic and cultural violence in order to empower young women in their communities. India's Family Counseling Program also seeks to end the cycle of family violence by providing therapy services to nearly 500 people a year.

Leadership Development

From its inception, the YWCA has been an organization dedicated to the development of young women's leadership. As one of the agency's three main goals, YWCAs have focused their energy on empowering women and girls to become activists for the organization's cause. In Lebanon, for example, the Women's Leadership Training Programs are focused on increasing the capacity of young women to be parliamentary deputies, while also exposing them to the politics of women's rights and welfare.

World YWCA offers a wide range of international advocacy and leadership training opportunities for young women around the world. A variety of internships provide emerging activists to participate on the UN platform, in international conventions, and with the Human Rights Council in Geneva where the World YWCA headquarters is located. To further develop effective female leadership, the organization facilitates inter-organizational exchanges that provide trainees an opportunity to share lessons, strategies, resources and support.

STRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY

As mentioned earlier, World YWCA is an international coalition of 122 national YWCA organizations. This global network serves many purposes, including international advocacy, organizational fund and resource development, leadership development, and volunteer recruitment. It also acts as an international political platform for women around the world.

Despite its deep historical roots, very little has been written about the origins of local YWCAs. It is clear that most of them were formed separately from the international association and then became affiliated (some quicker than others). The formation of new YWCAs is most often a grassroots process through which a group of women will identify a need in their community (e.g. reproductive health issues, poor education, domestic violence, or political oppression) and then begin to form a response, often in connection with other YWCAs. Others have formed as a result of YWCA members visiting other regions and then establishing centers to address the welfare of women. This somewhat organic process has allowed the agency to offer women the chance to define their own problems and needs. Today the organization has been established in 22,000 communities.

Organizational Leadership

The World YWCA Board is made up of a president (Susan Brennan), a general secretary, Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, seven officers and 12 board members that serve as the formal governing body of the association. The board sets standards regarding purpose, governance, membership, programs and advocacy, human resources and financial management. In addition to developing an organizational constitution for all member YWCAs to adhere to, the board organizes regular international conferences, advocacy, and fundraising events. The Board supports the largely grassroots-style of the organization where community members play a significant role in identifying needs, program development, implementation and goal setting. The small international staff and the internationally diverse board provide opportunities for historically-disadvantaged regions to shape the directions of the organization.

National and local organizational structures are quite similar. In Lebanon, for example, the YWCA is staffed primarily by 800 volunteers. The national association is responsible for representing the interests of the ten different local associations in meetings sponsored by World YWCA. It is governed by a council that consists of the presidents, directors and representatives of the different local associations. This national council is responsible for providing significant support to local YWCA's including leadership training, exchanges of knowledge and skills between the various local associations, emergency relief, expansion of services and geographic reach, partnerships for collaboration and funding and advocacy for the human rights of women.

Each local Lebanese association has its own small team of executive staff and a group of volunteers that provide outreach and services. Clients are also volunteers, working in a cooperative fashion. Significant volunteer presence fosters a greater responsiveness to

pertinent community needs. YWCA Lebanon's major programs are its daycare centers, sewing workshops, microenterprise programs, orphan sponsorship programs, and children's summer camps for the disadvantaged. Each local association also has its own board of directors that is responsible for overseeing agency policy and bylaws, fund development, and other forms of resource building. These boards are representations of the communities that they serve with respect to age, socioeconomic status, and education.

This is the general structure of most of the local associations, though a few national associations in the most developed countries have larger, more bureaucratic, structures. This can lead to greater top-down power and less involvement of clients and community members in service delivery and outreach and advocacy efforts. Still the vast majority of YWCA's are small and volunteer driven.

Non-formal Power Structure

The shift in power from northern to southern hemisphere members within the organization has been a gradual process. In the 1930s the identity of the international committee began to include more diverse members and an affirmative action policy was adopted later to ensure representation of southern or non-western members on the board. Despite the fact that the first World YWCA council convened in 1898, it was not until 1947 that the organization held the first council outside of the western world in Hangzhou, China. Even then, it was not until the early 1990s that the World YWCA president was from a developing nation (Mrs. Razia Ismail Abbasi of India).

World YWCA continues the struggle to find a north-south balance. Young women from more developed and economically stable regions have a better chance to intern or volunteer with the international association and are more likely to have the opportunity to travel to regional and international trainings. While international councils and conferences are attended by women from all corners of the world, there tend to be more women from the developed world at these events due to greater access to resources.

Collaborations

Partnership and collaboration have played a significant role in the strength and sustainability of the YWCA from early on. As far back as the early 1900s the organization has been collaborating with the League of Nations and then the UN to tackle issues of female oppression and the feminization of poverty, resulting in consultative status with the UN. This has greatly enhanced the YWCA's ability to affect change on the global level and provide women with a powerful political platform. UNIFAM is a regular partner of the agency, such as the recent announcement the two made about working together to raise and provide more funding for women's organizations dealing with HIV and AIDS.

On the local level, these relationships are just as important. Coupling with other various women's organizations and agencies with similar priorities has allowed the YWCA to have the biggest impact. Unfortunately, the often informal nature of these connections and a lack of research and documentation have made it difficult to identify specific

partner agencies. Often churches and other religious groups act as a means of building funding, clientele, and volunteer bases as well.

Resource Development

The YWCA is funded both internally as a membership organization and externally with donations and contracts, that provide a fairly stable revenue stream for the organization. Membership dues serve as a major source of funding for the various local activities, as well as an avenue for information dissemination and further fundraising. There are over 25 million contributing members from all over the world. The member base is made up of local associations, individuals and other organizations that support the mission of the agency and want to be involved. Services are not restricted to members, and in most areas serve mainly non-members. Investment income has been another, less lucrative, form of income generation.

As for external fundraising, the YWCA's ecumenical partners have provided significant financial support for the organization's work. This has often been a source of unrestricted funding, though recent economic conditions have affected this. The association has done a substantial amount of campaigning around HIV and AIDS and around Leadership development (including its Power to Change matching fund) which has led to a considerably large resource base. Partnerships with and monetary awards from various UN departments has also played a significant role in the sustainability of the YWCA. Also, countless private donors and numerous regional foundations have aided the organization in addressing its priorities, though a lack of research and documentation has made it difficult to identify specific local funders.

World YWCA has provided extensive training in resource development. Its Regional Training Institutes (RTIs) have been especially effective in such locales as Nigeria, Indonesia, Trinidad, and Tobago. These training programs provide information around donor identification and stewardship, partnering with donors, regional and sub-regional donors, and skills building related to fundraising and proposal writing. And finally one of the biggest resources are the millions of volunteers that provide outreach and services that include daycare, sex education, case management of domestic violence victims, vocational training, and much more. Without these dedicated and generous individuals, the organization would not be able to be what it is, the largest and oldest international women's group.

CONCLUSION

The YWCA has enjoyed a relatively strong and stable existence. Still, the arenas in which it works are not immune to political and economic barriers to success. As local economies struggle to keep up, various YWCAs are struggling to keep their doors open to serve their communities. Fortunately a large volunteer base serves as a support for local organizations even in hard times. However, the World YWCA Treasurer has reported stagnation in development of new member enrollments. New forms of outreach are needed to identify inactive regions and localities. Some national associations have begun to open up membership to men which may help deal with the decline in enrollment.

The reality facing the World YWCA is a continuous political battle for the rights and welfare of women and their families in the face of patriarchal global power and control. Until government officials and political leaders around the world begin to truly represent the interests of women, this will be a major challenge to the organization. More public funding and services for women are needed for the YWCA vision to become a reality. Despite its strong ties with the UN that have proven to be extremely beneficial, more national and local government ties are needed to create more structural changes for the communities served.

Improving the influence of women from developing nations is a continuous challenge facing the YWCA. Given the structural barriers that socially marginalize developing regions it is always a struggle to insure that all women are being represented in goal-setting and decision-making processes. World YWCA needs to find new and improved ways of supporting the involvement of the relatively less advantaged on the international level. Scholarship programs, for example, could provide more women with the opportunity to travel for councils, summits, and trainings. In order for the agency to be most effective, it needs to address issues of equal representation at the international level.

While each YWCA is responsible for its own evaluation, it would help if the World YWCA put more efforts into the evaluation of its various local and national associations. Much more could be done to collect outcome information which would greatly increase its ability to provide better services by illustrating areas of programmatic need and identifying successful practices. Increased evaluation efforts would also help to expand the organizations donor and membership bases.

It is clear that the World YWCA has played a significant role in the recent history of women. What began as the desires of two religious women in Britain to improve the conditions of women has evolved into the largest and oldest women's organization in the world. It has provided millions of women and girls with safe shelter, food, life skills and vocational training, education around health, childcare, micro-enterprise support, and much more. It has connected women around the world to universal issues such as HIV and AIDS, peace emerging from war and conflict, sustainability, and human rights. This has allowed for a sharing of values, information, skills and resources that ultimately fosters a greater internationalism. World YWCA realizes the potential of women to influence the direction of important policy reform and serves as a strong example for anyone hoping to improve the welfare of women, their children and their families.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the organizational structure foster and/or impede the diffusion of organizational learning?
2. Since very few organizations date back more than 150 years, what do you think has allowed the YWCA to sustain such a long life?
3. Why is leadership development so central to promoting organizational capability and sustainability of World YWCA?

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