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Towards ICCS 2022

Youth and Women Groups in Effective and Inclusive Dialogue on Social Cohesion

By Nazhath Faheema

SYNOPSIS

Effective dialogue for social cohesion relies upon involving women and youth in meaningful ways. It is necessary for the community and civil society groups to urgently develop new strategies to widen community involvement.

COMMENTARY

Studies and examples from around the world suggest that engaging women and youths in dialogue efforts improve the effectiveness of such efforts. Yet, we often find inadequate representation of women and youths in dialogue processes, civil society organisations, and multi-sectoral engagements. Organisational rigidities, historical developments, and complacency are usually offered to explain the status quo.

The reliance on traditional leadership comprising senior gentlemen is an age-old issue and frequently cited in feedback on effectiveness of dialogue and engagement at the ground level. Social efforts promoting unity in Singapore also suffer from this challenge, so the question is: how to make the involvement and leaderships more diverse, and hence more effective?

Over twenty years ago, British scholar [Ursula King](#) identified women as the missing component in dialogue. Today, if one scans the images of a year of events that promote social harmony and dialogue, one will easily spot the lack of gender diversity and intergenerational representation. The pressing need to diversify such efforts with female leaders and youth voices is evident.

The Purpose of Youth and Women Groups

We can identify two main types of youth and women groups within civil society. First, there are independent groups which are formed voluntarily by citizens interested in conducting activities aimed at a specific purpose. Examples of these in Singapore would include the Interfaith Youth Circle and hash.peace. These youth groups were started by young Singaporeans and targeted people aged 18 to 45 to engage in interfaith dialogue.

The other type are affiliated groups that are part of established institutions. The Women of Faith in the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) of Singapore, the youth wing of the IRO, and the youth wing within the Taoist Federation are examples of such organisations. They operate within the wider mission as an avenue for women and youth engagement.

The purpose of such groups is not to compete with the existing organisations or other platforms within specific organisations. They emerged because there was a sense that women and youth were under-represented, both in terms of their interests not being central, as well as not being included amongst the organisations' leadership. In some cases, there seemed a preponderance for specific outcomes from the personal standpoint of those in charge. As a result, the needs and interests of women and youth were marginalised. These groups, therefore, serve as an engagement platform for the women and young, and help diversify the engagement.

Advantages of Youth and Women Groups

Evidence from global experience points to the fact that youth and women groups enhance inclusivity as this allows wider participation in events and organisations. It is often felt that organisations with strong male leadership may deter and hinder women from joining, contributing, or progressing. Similarly, youths are undermined in organisations if they are felt to be inexperienced.

Youth and women groups allow for their involvement without the dominance and interference of senior male leaders. Both groups represent major sections of society. Their voice is important if we are taking a whole of society approach in enhancing social cohesion.

Youth and women groups are focused on matters related to the age and gender of individuals. For example, youths are keen on discussing topics such as cultural appropriation, and racism including the "[black lives matters](#)" issue. Youth are also interested in issues trending online domestically such as the [debate](#) about Muslim nurses wearing the headscarf. To them, these topics are inadequately addressed by civil society organisations led by senior leaders who often only skirt around the ideas of unity and harmony. Similarly, women groups such as the [Women of Faith group](#) in IRO organise activities that feature female speakers talking about religious principles and traditions. They have conducted talks that amplify the role of women within religions.

Through concentrated efforts, women and youth groups can bring more people on board and interest them in actively promoting dialogue and cohesion. As young people

are often mobilised against cohesion by actors and organisations seeking to promote hatred or violence, it is important that they are actively included. Again, as an old saying goes, women hold up half the sky.

Moreover, a [study of the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in peacebuilding](#) after intercommunal violence showed that efforts that actively included both women and youth were generally more effective. As such, sidelining women and young people seems potentially damaging to dialogue and cohesion efforts.

The [Youth Leadership Programme](#) in the International Conference on Cohesive Societies is an excellent platform for young people to significantly engage and voice their views. The programme is more active and dynamic in nature compared to the main conference, and it allows youths to voice their views comfortably. Nonetheless, more can be done to bring these youth voices into the wider discussion on cohesion in Singapore and beyond.

Disadvantages of Youth and Women Groups

However, youth and women groups do have potential disadvantages. If these groups operate on the idea that it is better for youth and women to have exclusive spaces for their engagement, they may neglect other areas of concern, and forget to see the bigger picture. Nevertheless, this is equally true of spaces dominated by male leaders.

Youth and women-related dialogues that take place within groups are not always well-integrated into the overall social cohesion conversation. It is possible for youth and women to be side-lined from key conversations about social cohesion, especially at the leadership level.

Lessons and Pointers

The American youth interfaith activist [Eboo Patel](#) observed that while many interfaith organisations marginalised young people in giving them little meaningful to do, extremist and militant groups offer them active participation and narratives to make their engagement meaningful within the group. As such, youth dialogue cannot simply be an afterthought.

However, there is concern that instead of being an avenue for people who have similar life experiences, these groups may become narrowly focused and exclusive. Therefore, it is important for these platforms to discuss gender and age-specific issues as well as challenges that affect the entire population.

Women and youth play a key role in preventing radicalisation, and in strengthening peacebuilding. Their voice in social cohesion dialogue is significant. They are no less important than theologians, priests, jurists, or other experts because everyone has a role in social cohesion.

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She is based in Singapore. This is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022.

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