

ACSHR 2022: 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights

#collectiveatwork

Accelerating the elimination of sexual and gender based violence in Africa

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1: Introductory Note

The 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR) has grown our hearts. We have expanded our capacity to embrace contradiction, to truly see the devastation of sexual and gender based violence and the joy of feminist siblinghood at once. We need both the fierceness and the tenderness we witnessed at ACSHR for the work ahead.

There were many reasons for Purposeful to think twice about hosting the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights. Sierra Leone has not hosted a conference of this scale in at least 40 years, and therefore Freetown does not have large-scale event infrastructure. We had only six months to plan, and we did not know how we would fund the conference.

But we are deep believers in the power of bringing feminists together, including and especially girls and young people. A conversation over a meal blossoms into a successful legislative advocacy campaign. Young feminists talking on the sidelines of buttoned-up conferences dream up a new fund focused on supporting young feminist activists. Many of the relationships that power Purposeful today formed at convenings – including on the dance floor! Convening African feminist activists is an expression of radical hope for the future. We don't know exactly what will emerge, but we trust it will be beautiful.

The theme of the conference was Accelerating the Elimination of Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Africa. After more than two years of a shadow pandemic of patriarchal violence, this conversation was overdue. It will take our collective

brilliance to achieve an end to sexual and gender based violence in this lifetime. Our conference hashtag, #collectiveatwork, highlights our collective power.

Collective work powered the conference far before our guests arrived. The conference was only possible with the heart, grit, and conviction of our team. The community of girls we work with, feminist activists, funders, allies and friends in the Sierra Leone Government all played a leading role in the planning and execution. More than 250 support staff – food vendors, decor team, sound engineers – contributed to the conference.

We faced many moments of doubt and even panic. Two months ahead of the conference, we realised our fear that no one would register was misplaced. Instead, we should have been worrying about having enough capacity for everyone who wanted to come. In the end, more than 900 people attended the conference, half of whom were young people.

We were thrilled to foreground the fierce feminist organising underway in Sierra Leone and share the power of our movements. Witnessing hundreds of feminists speak their truths in an agenda-setting space was humbling. And as an Africa-rooted global feminist hub for girls' activism, we were proud to create a uniquely multigenerational space.

Three months after the conference, we are still absorbing all that we experienced. We know that the seeds of transformative partnerships and powerful strategies were planted. We cannot wait to see what blossoms.

But there were also moments, places, and spaces where folks were excluded, unwelcomed, shut out and ignored. As much as the conference was a beautiful respite from the world outside, it also represented a microcosm of the world and all of the power imbalances and harms that we - as activists - work every day to transform. We, all of us, can do better. If we are to build the world of safety and justice and freedom we imagine, we must do better. To our queer, disabled siblings, we will do better. And we know that spaces like this - when held with care, attention, and love - are how we start to bridge some of those divides and build forward to a world free from violence.

When all is said and done, after so long apart, being together was the balm we all needed. To be filled up again by the beats and the fierceness of our feminist community. We hope to see you on the dance floor somewhere soon.

In gratitude for all we did together,

Rosa Bransky and Chernor Bah, Co-Founders & Co-CEOs, Purposeful

2: Gratitude to our Sponsors and Partners

Thank you to all our sponsors and partners. Without your collaboration and support, the conference would not have been possible. We know that eliminating gender based violence is only achievable when we harness our collective power. Thank you for demonstrating what is possible through #collectiveatwork.

- Purposeful
- African Federation for Sexual Health and Rights
- Government of Sierra Leone
- United Nations Spotlight Initiative funded by the European Union
- WOW - Women of the World
- Africell
- AYV Media
- UNFPA
- Plan International
- Mott McDonald Cambridge Education
- Leh Wi Lan
- British High Commission Freetown
- Global Fund for Women
- Fòs Feminista
- IPAS
- ISDAO
- The Fund for Global Human Rights
- AWDF

- Irish Aid
- CRIF
- Eyala
- Girls First Fund
- Action Health Incorporated
- RAES
- Resurj
- Together for Girls
- Care
- GT Bank
- United Bank for Africa
- Mercury International

The conference was convened by the African Federation for Sexual Health and Rights, in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone. It was made possible by the support of the Co-Convenor, the United Nations Spotlight Initiative funded by the European Union, the United Nations Resident Coordinator's office in Sierra Leone, our Programme Partner, WOW – Women of the World, feminist organisations and international collaborators.

The AFSHR was established in 2002 as an outcome of a convening held in South Africa of sexual and reproductive health advocates from across Africa. AFSHR's mandate is to advance sexual health and rights on the continent and has largely done so through partnerships to host Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights every two years since the initial 2002 convening. Over the past two decades, the conference has been held in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Namibia, Cameroon, Ghana. Dr. Uwemedimo Esiet is the convenor of ACSHR.

A special thank you to the conference Chief Patron, Her Excellency Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone, who played a key role in mobilising diverse resources for the conference. Her support was invaluable and contributed significantly to the success of the conference.

3: Let's Talk About the Money: What it really cost

ACSHR was a million dollar+ event that required huge amounts of resources, skill and goodwill to execute. We are choosing to share here the conference budget to make visible the realities of resourcing a conference of this sort in a country like Sierra Leone. And we share as an act of solidarity with the future hosts of ACSHR, to aid future fundraising efforts and to help others make informed decisions about what they are taking on.

Rooted in our values and our reason to be in the world, we made a set of choices about the direction and feel of the conference that would ultimately double a base-line budget. These included:

- A commitment that 50% of attendees should be young activists.
- We would bring folks from as many countries on the Continent as possible.
- We would not turn anyone from our community in Sierra Leone away, even if they could not afford registration or travel costs.
- The agenda would have multi-track sessions with a range of panels, workshops, and strategy sessions running concurrently.
- In recognition of their contributions, we would resource speakers to participate.
- To ensure girls could meaningfully participate and engage through the conference, we would need to hold dedicated space for them first through a Girls Summit.
- We would dance. A lot.
- If we were bringing Africa to Freetown, we would showcase the best that the country had to offer, including arts, culture, and food.

Total Cost of Running the Conference: \$1,395,000

- Total Direct Costs: \$850,000
- Total Indirect Costs: \$545,000

Total Raised Funds: \$795,000

- Ticket Sales: \$45,000

- Individual Session Sponsorship: \$50,000
- Conference Sponsorship: \$375,000
- Grants: \$150,000
- Major Discounts and In-kind Contributions: \$175,000

Total Purposeful Contribution: \$600,000

- Direct Financial Contribution: \$230,000
- Indirect Contributions including staff time: \$370,000

Breakdown of Direct Costs

- Participation and Inclusion: \$212,000
- Contributor costs, including fees and travel: \$156,000
- Music, arts, and entertainment: \$50,000
- Translation: \$39,000
- Venue: \$43,000
- Wellness and Collective Care: \$6,000
- Youth Participatory Grant Making: \$50,000
- Media, Research and Documentation: \$38,000
- Materials, Branding and Merchandise: \$39,000
- Food and Beverage: \$53,000
- Technology and IT Costs: \$50,000
- Travel, Logistics, Vehicles and Other Operations: \$114,000

Notes:

- Total Direct Costs includes all direct costs for steering committees, Girls' Summit, Youth Pre-Conference, Core Conference.
- Total Indirect Costs includes Purposeful staff time, contribution to overheads, major discounts, donations and in-kind contributions.
- Major Discounts and In-kind Contributions: Yemi Alade, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, AYV, Africell, security provided by Sierra Leone Police Force and Sierra Leone Armed Forces, vehicles provided by Sierra Leone Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NACOV Covid Testing Waivers.
- Participation and Inclusion includes youth travel, stipends, visas, flights, chaperone costs for under 18's, support to LGBTQIA+ & Sex Worker rights activists for travel and accommodation.
- Media, Research and Documentation includes costs to train a girls' photography corps.

What did we learn about funding a conference like this?

- The conference ultimately cost far more than we thought it would! Much of the cost is hidden, and a large contingency budget was needed. We could only pull off a conference like this, with a meaningful level of youth inclusion, arts, culture and diverse voices, because we have access to long-term flexible resources.
- Engaging young people who have never travelled to an international conference requires a logistical and financial investment. Thousands of staff hours, including three staff members working 24 hours per day for the five days leading up to the conference, were required to troubleshoot youth travel, including large numbers of missed flights.
- Holding a conference in Sierra Leone is very expensive. Infrastructural limitations and the extremely high cost of internal and international travel, along with the lack of a fully functioning venue, contributed significantly to the cost of the conference.
- At the time of planning, there was not a suitable conference venue in Freetown. Adapting the venue and creating a space fit for purpose meant a huge number of additional staff hours, and direct and indirect costs. For example, we had to bring in an external company to fit fire safety equipment in the venue at huge additional cost. Hundreds of staff hours were spent working to have a defunct lift fixed, including flying lift parts into the country to make the venue wheelchair accessible. The lift was never ultimately fixed.

- We were chosen as hosts only 6 months before the conference. Limited lead time meant we faced a significant increase in costs for travel and consultant time. The short time horizon constrained our ability to negotiate costs with suppliers. We estimate that this added 25% to the overall conference budget.
- Fundraising for a conference requires a different set of skills and relationships to our usual resource mobilisation efforts. Raising funds to support staff time for a conference has been almost impossible. Of course, with longer lead time, more would have been possible.

4: The Purposeful Flavour: Infusing the spirit of a feminist festival into the conference

Our Values in Practice:

- #collectiveatwork: the conference hashtag is a reminder that eliminating gender based violence is only possible through harnessing our collective power.
- Collectively designed: many people had a role in shaping the conference. The international and national steering committee, the youth steering committee and a number of partners played a key role in the design of the agenda and planning of the conference as a whole.
- A political agenda: the core purpose of the conference necessitated that patriarchy, power, and feminism were central to all discussions. We chose to embrace topics on the main agenda that in many spaces would only be addressed in side conversations or informal “corridor chats.”
- Survivors’ voices and leadership: conversations about violence often fail to include survivors themselves. Survivors were invited to share their experiences and propose solutions to eliminating Sexual Gender Based Violence.
- Intergenerational space that centres girls: girls and young people were centred via pre-conference engagements specifically for them [Girls’ Summit and Youth Pre-Conference] and key roles in the main conference as keynote speakers, panellists and session facilitators.
- Intersectionality: there was an intentional effort to invite and include in the agenda people who are usually at the margins, particularly in African contexts;

LGBTQIA+ persons, people with different types of disabilities, and sex workers' rights activists.

- Wellness: this work can be demanding, and so wellness was a priority. The conference featured a dedicated wellness space, a psychologist and medical doctor on site, as well as sessions specifically on wellness.
- Building skills & forming strategies for resistance: several sessions were designed as spaces to share strategies and build participants' advocacy skills.
- Joy: Music infused the space, with music between sessions and musical performances built into the agenda. We also knew we would be carving out space to dance together.
- Supporting girl & young women-led businesses: the food and garment stalls were all girl and women owned businesses. In addition, the photographers were all girls and young women who were primarily from Girls Behind the Lens, a young women-owned business based in Freetown.

The Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights is a long-term process of building and fostering regional dialogue and alliances on Sexual and Reproductive Health (S.R.H) that leads to concrete actions and enhances stakeholder-capacity to influence policy and programming in favour of a sexually healthy continent. Since it was first held in 2004, the biannual regional convening has brought key stakeholders including government, civil society, media, academics and activists to discuss and advance the sexual health and rights agenda in the continent. Previous conferences were held Johannesburg, South Africa (2004); Nairobi, Kenya (2006); Abuja, Nigeria (2008); Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2010); Windhoek, Namibia (2012); Yaoundé,

Cameroon (2014); Accra, Ghana (2016); Johannesburg, South Africa (2018); Nairobi, Kenya (2020).

After two years of a global shadow pandemic for women and girls, the 10th ACSHR was a critical milestone for human rights and gender justice on the Continent. The Conference was an urgent space to **reconvene and re-commit to shared goals, principles and promising practices towards ending sexual and gender based violence**. So even with just six months to plan the 10th ACSHR, we knew it had to be more than just a conference. It had to be deeply political and joyful. We knew we had to do it the Purposeful way - by infusing the spirit of a feminist festival across the whole event. Naming it as a festival, a community celebration with music, food and art, established our vision for the conference and informed all of the planning and preparation. Convenings play a critical role in building and sustaining movements, and will continue to be a strategy we and other social justice organisations use. Therefore, we have captured some of our reflections and learnings to contribute to a feminist framework for mainstream conference spaces.

Curating the Conference

Tweet from SexLivesOfAfricanWomen (@SexLivesAfrica), 1st July 2022:

Do you know what is therapeutic?

#Afrifems congregating and dancing to afrobeats as they share space with each other at #ACSHR2022 by @Purposeful_org

Pleasure is resistance.

Joy is resistance.

#CollectiveAtWork #bookstagram #bookauthor #blackjoy #EndVAW

Girls and young people in leadership

From the beginning, we planned to have a Girls' Summit and Youth Pre-Conference before the main programme. These were as important to us as the main conference, and each had dedicated teams.

To design the Youth Pre-Conference and inform the main conference, we recruited a Youth Steering Committee who would each receive free entry to the conference (and whom we later sponsored entirely to participate e.g. flights, accommodation, expenses). The Youth Steering Committee was an inclusive group of young activists from every corner of the continent.

With the Youth Steering Committee we developed objectives, brainstormed themes, and began to suggest sessions for the main conference too. The group was very clear about the need to lift up youth-led efforts on abortion rights, to tackle Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage, to create space for honest and frank discussions on LGBTQIA+ rights and to explore what feminism means in Africa for young people. The group volunteered themselves to design almost all the Youth Pre-Conference sessions as well as several in the main conference.

As part of the Youth Pre-Conference, 250 participants co-authored a Youth Manifesto to be shared during the opening plenary of the main conference. The rich ideas and recommendations that participants generated during the writing workshop will form a series of youth policy briefs on each thematic area. We also committed to

having an adolescent girl or young person in every single plenary and session as keynotes, speakers or facilitators.

Designing the arc

To design the thematic focuses and conference journey, the team spoke extensively with partners, collaborators and took inspiration from the Youth Steering Committee. We were deeply committed to carving out space for more political issues like bodily autonomy - which felt even more critical given the announcement that Roe v. Wade would be reversed in the USA in the days before - LGBTQIA+ rights, survivor-centred discussions on FGM, child marriage and sexual and gender based violence, and resourcing feminist movements.

Day 1: Bodily Autonomy, Choice, and Rights: ending violence in multiple forms.

We began with a rallying cry for participants to imagine a different kind of world. Sessions focused on violations to the bodily autonomy of girls and women on the Continent and lifting up grassroots-led strategies to push back and reimagine normative practices.

Day 2: Naming Our Stories and Demanding Our Rights

The day focused on an epidemic of violence through the eyes of survivors, the partners who are demanding justice, and the power of youth activism to transform the world as we know it. We lifted up survivor-centred strategies for accessing justice and transforming systems and services to create safety and dignity.

Day 3: Looking Ahead: Shared Visions and Collective Accountability

The final day focused on an urgent conversation on accountability and what it means to centre movements for justice and an end to violence. Through powerful strategies and tactics that model safety, dignity, and bodily autonomy for all girls and all women everywhere, the day offered a powerful reminder that the world we imagine is possible.

From panels to workshops

When designing the agenda for the conference, we wanted to do things differently. Historically, the team had been to conferences that were panel and plenary focused, with lots of listening and very little action. We believe that all participants have a leadership role to play in ending violence, so we wanted to avoid positioning them as passive listeners. Instead, we wanted to curate a creative but strategic festival space. We adopted an organising approach, using workshop and participatory methodologies to spark shared advocacy, shared learning on movement building practice and coalition building. We teamed up with our partners to brainstorm ideas and design interactive strategy sessions.

More than just a “conference”

In addition to the plenaries and strategy sessions, we designed a festival space and programme grounded in music, dance, art, and wellbeing, recognising how political these things are. We partnered with the Women of the World Festival to programme

a Feminist Book Club, inviting Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah and Namina Forna to speak about their path-breaking work, in conversation with Margret Busby. We had a dedicated wellbeing space with on-site trauma-informed therapists and healers, and sessions curated around the politics of self-care. All day, every day, there was music and dance, from Yemi Alade's 'surprise' main stage performance on the opening day, and local dance groups taking over the Discovery Stage, to singers and poets in each plenary. If you were walking between sessions or having your lunch, chances are you were dancing.

We welcomed young women-led vendors to the Marketplace, where they sold locally made products like soaps and textiles. In between sessions you could walk through the Stories of Girls' Resistance exhibition or Black Girl Play exhibition in the Youth Zone. All aspects of the conference were opportunities for political education.

Read more about Stories of Girls' Resistance on [their website](#).

Read more about the Black Girl Play exhibition on the [Washington Post website](#).

Tweet from WeArePurposeful (@Purposeful_org), 30th June 2022:

HELLOOOO DAY 2

We are ready to get going, but not before we share some of the beauty and joy we're experiencing here at #ACSHR2022! Look at the beauty of the #CollectiveAtWork



Tweet from Vicky the Poet (@poet_vicky), 29th June 2022:

Hello Freetown

I'm here and I'm at the #ACSHR2022

Doing what I do best!

Poetry

#AfroPoet

#ACSHR2022



Spotlight on: Dancing Our Way to Freedom

Purposeful commissioned the University of Sierra Leone Theatre Group for a very special performance of 'The Throne' at Freetown City Hall, with the generous

support of GT Bank. Oumar Farouk Sesay's 'The Throne' is a landmark piece of work that explores gender identity, sexuality and power in Africa. Exploring queer African culture against a backdrop of traditional Sierra Leonean music and creative expressions, this was a theatrical spectacular to kick off ACSHR. 'The Throne' is the first major new work of theatre to be performed in Sierra Leone since the Civil War and the first major work to explore queer identity.

5: Hosting a Conference in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is an extremely unusual choice for an international conference. When regional or global convenings are held on the Continent, they are most usually confined to the largest economies (Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana) and/or to Southern and Eastern Africa. And beyond the major hubs of Accra and Dakar, West Africa is rarely represented. The ACSHR was the largest conference held in Sierra Leone since the Civil War and the largest space ever convened on women's and girls' rights. The conference also welcomed the single largest international delegation in the country's history, bringing significant resources into the country and showcasing the best of the country's arts and culture, and highlighting the fierce young activists organising everywhere to make the country a better place for us all.

Hosting the conference in our home town was an immense privilege, but it also came with a whole host of practical and political realities - often from the ridiculous to the sublime - that are worth noting for posterity and for those hoping to organise a conference outside of the usual international infrastructure. And yet, the absence of some of the trappings of a usual conference container also opened up possibilities to bring a creativity and collective spirit into the space.

There is nothing quite as unifying as 300 young people dancing to Afro Beats on a stage that we'd finished building at 4am that morning, and then carrying their chairs with them into a break-out space because we didn't quite have enough furniture. We patched the conference together with love and a lot of goodwill from our community, and we believe that spirit blessed the space in a very particular way.

“...I think one of the things that was really important is that we really wanted the conference to not just be a conference in Sierra Leone, but by building and investing in local organisations, local businesses, local infrastructure; it was something that was *in Sierra Leone, delivered by Sierra Leone and actually hosted by Sierra Leoneans.*”

Sian Lord-Baptiste, Chief of Media and Production, Purposeful

Getting Folks Here

Freetown is the only capital on the Continent that boasts arrival by air, land, and sea. “The reality of this was a heavy lift on travel and orientation to ensure participants felt a joyful conference welcome from the moment they landed, with banners and welcome team at the airport, through to buses, boats, and smooth arrivals at all the partner hotels. For ease of those travelling, we took on all the transportation, hotel bookings, set up of temporary covid-testing stations, and quickly became a mini travel agency!”

Erin Barnes, Projects Manager, Purposeful

Getting the building ready

We confirmed the venue three months before the conference. The most suitable location was an empty space that had never had all of its rooms put to use at once, with no running water in the kitchen, no internet, no furniture and no air conditioning, so we started from scratch. From purchasing and installing the chairs in the atrium to

plumbing water into the kitchens, our team worked tirelessly to get the building ready. We had some big wins, like getting the fire system installed just in time, along with some hard losses like not getting the lift parts in time to make the venue wheelchair accessible.

"There's a detached idealism that people bring to this work that is so impractical. That can never get any real work done. But it's the pound of flesh that you all had to give up to make that conference happen, the multiple pounds of flesh that you had to lay on the table. All of the sacrifices and compromises, because it's a luxury to not have to make a compromise. And some of the loudest people are the ones that never had to make a compromise, never had to worry about whose salary they had to make sure is paid next week. Oh there was so much pragmatism in this conference.

Like, 'We're not gonna answer all the questions, you all will figure it out, no, there's no AC. So good luck.' You will be hot. There will be no wi-fi. And there will also be amazing music and there will be joy.

I'm still unpacking how meaningful it was that it happened in Sierra Leone. All of the things, the trappings that weren't there, all of that was stripped-back. So if you can make a joyous and work-filled space with nothing that we depend upon typically to make these spaces happen, it bodes well for the work.

So I wanted to name that. If I ever get a chance to sit and write about African feminism, when I try to draw the distinctions, I will say that there's not a lot of air

between the African feminisms or the third world feminisms, the post-colonial feminisms and Black feminisms, to me, they're all the same body of work. But if there's a distinction to be made, it's that there's an African pragmatism that I saw in that space, and I've seen in the young women y'all had on site...there's just a beauty in their presence in the space and there's a beauty in their leadership, watching them in this conference. There's such beauty in watching Ami and Isha and Kaata and all of them just being present in a way. It's a different tone from what is uplifted typically in most conference spaces, or most movement spaces. And I'm really excited about that.

Dr Ramatu Bangura, Executive Director, CRIF

Was it a feminist conference?

Given Purposeful's mission as a feminist movement building hub, we wanted to inject an intersectional feminist lens through all aspects of the conference - and we needed to do this in the context of a mainstream conference space, in partnership with governments and multi-lateral donors. Feminism out loud and feminist by stealth became our motto.

We were intentional in our politics when designing the programme, ensuring there was space for feminist discussion and making sure feminist voices and actors were present in every session and plenary. Where a feminist partner could not afford to sponsor a session, we found other ways to cover the cost and encouraged them to lead that session anyway. It was more important to us that feminist groups and movements truly leading efforts on the Continent were holding space and critical

conversations, such as on young feminist activism, on disability justice, on sex and pleasure. But we will also need to name that feminist communities did not have full control over the speaker and invitation list - of who was in the room - and we acknowledge the harm that came from the platforming of speakers with homophobic and transphobic ideologies in particular.

Was it a feminist conference? Probably not. Was it a space where African feminists claimed space and lived out loud, amongst all the challenges of this world? Indeed, it was.

Tweet from Kagwiria Purity (@pruncie), 30th June 2022:

This is what feminist aunties look like @nas009 @LeylaHussein @TabithaMpamira @MissBachia @Purposeful_org #Day2Vibes #AfriFem



Tweet from Theriyeh Korama-Nenneh (@AmbWarriorTee), 27th June 2022:

Our shared experiences explain why young feminists like the ones convening at the #ACSHR2022 mobilize their forces for change.

As co panelised, we're excited to share our perspectives on Feminist Solidarity Across Borders.

The safest place I've been as a Feminist! @_gabriellenpb



6: Why We Convene: Claiming our space as feminists

Feminist convenings are spaces to connect and build relationships and solidarity. They are an opportunity for reflection, learning, and shifting of perspectives. Coming together with other feminist activists offers a moment of respite, and an opportunity to rejuvenate.

Our collective power has the ability to eliminate sexual and gender based violence and tear down the norms, systems and structures that underpin it. ***Convenings are a powerful movement building tool. We cannot collaborate or conspire to take bold action together if we do not know each other. We allocate resources and time to organise and attend convenings because there is immense power in building connections, planting seeds for collaboration, hearing from each other and dreaming together.*** African feminist convenings, specifically, are places we can show up as our full selves, share the challenges, pain, fear, and hopes for our work, and as we did at the 10th ACSHR, dance together.

“When you come together as we are, when we come together as a group, there's just this fuel, this passion when we come together - a desire for you to do more, for you to see a better Africa, for you to make sure that okay, the rights of both men and women are respected equally. There's a lot we can do when we come together, because we are all coming from different places with different perspectives, right?

We're going to come with different solutions. And then when we bring it together, we're going to definitely find a concrete solution on how to go about this thing. I know

what they say about unity, when we are united, it is easier for us to do something than when we are scattered.”

- Cheche, Girls' Summit Participant,

A safe place to share - a place you will be understood

Africa is a diverse continent: its people, cultures, socio-political contexts are different in so many ways. Yet, the opposite is also true: we are so similar, and our struggles, varying as they may be, are rooted in similar histories, systems and beliefs. There is a lot that we understand about each other, without ever having set foot in each other's countries. African feminists have convened for decades. The friendships and partnerships forged in these spaces continue to ripple outward, playing a critical role in forming progressive agendas, transformative programming and actions and enabling joint advocacy at the global level.

African feminists have similar experiences of the world, of what it means to be an African activist, or an African-led organisation. Unfortunately, many of us share the experience with implicit and explicit lack of trust between development and philanthropic organisations in the Global North and those in Africa.

This history and set of dynamics manifest in a number of ways that shape how we engage in global spaces. For example, for so long, the “dark continent” narrative has shaped perspectives about Africa. As Africans, we actively seek to critique our contexts without supporting the “dark continent” narrative - a balancing act one has to play particularly skillfully in global spaces. The current nature of philanthropy and

the development sector, where the money and power are held in the Global North necessitates this balancing act.

In global convenings, African feminists often need to be more diplomatic, filtering their thinking, politics and critique to be more palatable. African feminists find ourselves having to explain dynamics on the ground in detail to audiences who may not understand the cultural, religious or political reality we operate in. This creates a complexity on how we can discuss the challenges we face and the strategies we employ. While global feminist spaces create a safer environment and have nurtured strong relationships and partnerships across continents and movements, they have not necessarily come with the same ease of being in #Afrifem spaces. African feminist convenings allow participants to be vulnerable in a way they cannot be in other conference settings, and allow for depth in how topics are explored, they encourage honest self and collective critique, and the building of critical relationships that can advance African feminist positions on global platforms.

“There's a sense of relief from being with like-minded people...a sense of safety, of camaraderie, and of togetherness.”

Fanta Toure-Puri, Girls First Fund

Building relationships that strengthen movements

New relationships are formed and old relationships are rekindled - relationships that will last for years to come and influence joint action, strategic partnerships and ideas that strengthen our organising and movements. The relationships formed are personal but also increase the visibility of our different initiatives and perspectives.

Convenings allow for the identification of allies and potential partners or funders. The dialogues we hold in convenings create opportunities to understand each other, build trust and deepen alliances. Bringing people together sparks collaboration across borders and movements. The energy generated keeps movements from fragmenting and dying out. These relationships are key to turning reflections into action, to strengthening existing work, and to sustaining our various acts of resistance.

“When you apply a feminist lens you need a social attitude of resistance but it can get exhausting. But I’d rather be a feminist and build solidarity with my community because it’s freeing! Feminism is freeing.”

Yah Vallah Parwon, Medica, Liberia

Bridging divides between and within our movements

Convenings create a space to explore tensions and gaps within and between movements. Read more about this on the [CREA website](#).

Bringing together sex workers’ rights activists, LGBTQIA+ rights activists, practitioners in INGOs and funding institutions, disability rights activists and community-based organisations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights creates an opportunity to learn about each other’s struggles. Misalignments that seem impossible to resolve from our respective homes are easier to engage when we come together and build relationships. It can, for example, help to build understanding on why sex work must be decriminalised, how to stand in solidarity with LGBTQIA+ activists or how to use the gaps in existing legislation to advocate for safe abortion access. A

multigenerational convening creates an opportunity for different generations of feminists to share their perspectives. These cross movement, cross regional discussions spark new ideas and strategies. In addition, they help us to move closer to a common position on a range of issues.

“It was important for me to attend to promote disability mainstreaming and inclusion in the women’s /feminist movement/ youth movement linking it to the disability rights movement to ensure that needs and aspirations of women and girls with disabilities are included... I believe self-representation is important as I know the challenges that we face, and also have alternative solutions through lived experience as a person with disability.”

Agness Chindimba, Deaf Women Included, Zimbabwe

“I also wanted to kind of just get a sense - feel the pulse of topics that are burning - that are critical that have been addressed, and also to understand how they are being addressed. You know, what is the perspective that people are approaching certain issues from? Even down to what is the language now? As a political strategy, sometimes we've changed the language, to better address issues. And it was important I felt to just get a sense of where we are, where the topic is, who is doing what, and who is saying what about adolescent girls. And of course, around SRHR”

- Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Resource Center for Women and Girls, Kenya

Rejuvenating

For many feminists, their activism, and even simply naming themselves as feminist, isolates them from their community. Their African feminist networks then serve as a

refuge and community, even if not in physical proximity. Coming together then is a moment of relief, a moment to let one's guard down, a moment of respite from the isolation, and a moment full of joy, even as we have come together to discuss different forms of oppression and how to overcome them. ***To dance together, to eat together, to laugh together– in person and not through our screens– is healing. Engaging with feminist siblings, survivors and thought leaders on a range of issues creates an opportunity for reflection and for the restoration of our hope.***

“I always enjoy being in feminist spaces with African feminists, it brings me a lot of joy, especially because we haven't seen each other for so long.”

Kemi Akinfaderin, Fòs Feminista

Highlights and Outcomes

Below are some of the key highlights and outcomes from across the six days of the conference:

A diverse audience of participants with regional representation

We welcomed over 900 participants from 41 countries with representation from across Africa including adolescent girls, young people, people living with disabilities and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. We also welcomed activists and well-being practitioners from Latin America, Palestine, Syria, and Europe.

A large girl and youth representation

350 adolescent girls and youth leaders were supported to attend the Main Conference, Youth Pre-Conference and the Girls' Summit. This large presence of girls and youth was possible due to financial commitments specifically to support their participation. Girls and young people are often on the agenda, but not in the spaces where they are being discussed, despite the critical role they play in movements and collectives. It was therefore critical for us to mobilise funding to create space for them to connect and learn from each other, as well as to prepare them to engage in the main conference; where they were not just participants, but were part of panels and facilitated sessions.

Acclaimed speakers and facilitators

We welcomed two heads of state and three First Ladies as well as several Ministers. We were joined by leaders from six UN agencies, INGOs, regional NGOs, women's funds, feminist funds and private philanthropy. We were honoured to have keynote speeches from renowned authors, youth and movement leaders, singers and musicians. Watch [here](#) the conference highlights film.

The exceptional facilitators and speakers contributed to the richness of the discussions throughout the conference, from the Girls' Summit to the Main Conference.

One of the keynote speakers at the conference was Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, the acclaimed author of 'The Sex Lives of African Women'. Nana also facilitated a number of sessions on Sex, Pleasure, and Shame - in addition to a Feminist Book

Club conversation (with Margaret Busby!) on her book. Reflecting on the session she facilitated at the Girls' Summit, Nana published an article in the Mail & Guardian South Africa, in which she notes:

"...it was a privilege to be in Sierra Leone serving as an "Auntie" to young girls from across the continent, sharing with them what I have learnt about the beautiful possibilities that our bodies hold when they are truly our own; that your body first and foremost belongs to you; that you deserve to feel safe in your skin; that no act of sex should feel painful; that sex with yourself is okay and the safest way to experience pleasure; that no adult should have sex with a child. Indeed, that is not sex but rape. That pain is a sign that something is wrong in your body and should not be tolerated because you are a girl or a young woman."

Read the article, Teaching African Girls about Sex, on [the Mail & Guardian website](#).

Effectiveness of a participatory workshopping approach in organising transnational coalitions and advocacy

When designing the agenda for the conference, we wanted to do things differently. Historically, the team had been to conferences that were panel and plenary-focused, with lots of listening and very little action. We wanted to avoid repetitive panels and design a creative, but strategic festival space. We adopted an organising approach, using workshop and participatory methodologies to spark shared advocacy, shared learning on practice and coalition building. This included sessions on disability justice, young feminist organising, LGBTQIA+ rights, financial and policy dialogues in Africa on SRHR, Generation Equality, sex and pleasure, and multilateral

partnerships. With some partners that were interested in the idea but not sure how to go about this, someone from the team brainstormed ideas with them and supported them to design an interactive, strategy session.

Clear calls for action as well as policy and practice changes from government, multilaterals and civil society

The discussions at the conference sparked reflections on policy and practice and clarity on the action needed across a range of actors. Thus far, these have been captured in the following documents:

- The Girls' Summit and Youth Pre-Conference culminated in the drafting of a Girls Manifesto and Youth Manifesto; statements that clearly articulate what girls/young people need and are calling for. Both statements were read in the plenary in the Main Conference.
- The AWDF call to action, where they commit to: "Call on governments, donors, feminist funds, Women Rights Organisations and the private sector to prioritise the following recommendations to achieve greater impact in policy and financing outcomes for African Women's SRHR."
- The Plan International Policy Statement, where they explore what needs to be done to protect the health of adolescent girls and women across the globe, and particularly in Africa and ensure that their right to live free from violence is fulfilled.

- The Center for Health Education and Vulnerable Support shared a call to action, with the following recommendations:
 - Redefine feminist funding to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ coalitions
 - Include African LGBTQIA+ voices and perspectives in African feminist spaces and conversations
 - Acknowledge the validity of Trans identities and take action to realise trans rights and increase collaboration and cooperation between women and LGBTQIA+ organisations.

Links to the content described above:

Read the Girls Manifesto [on the Purposeful website](#).

Read the Youth Manifesto in the [Youth Pre-Conference report](#).

Read the AWDF call to action [on the AWDF website](#).

Read the Plan International Policy Statement [on the ReliefWeb website](#).

Read the CHEVS call to action [on the CHEVS website](#).

Finally, we have started to hear reflections from those who attended on how the conference is informing their work, for example; using the girls and youth manifestos to inform abortion rights advocacy in Nigeria (as shared by a youth steering committee member), potential long term collaborations and planned joint sessions at upcoming strategic spaces like the 2023 Women Deliver conference, as well at individual level reflections on the value of the conference on the work of government entities in Sierra Leone:

“My work in the national machinery for women will be enhanced professionally with the new ideas from well-meaning activists from around the world.”

- Charles Vandi, Director of Gender Affairs, Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, Sierra Leone.

Announcement on the Safe Motherhood Bill

The conference culminated with an announcement from the President of Sierra Leone of the cabinet’s approval of the Safe Motherhood Bill which would guarantee access to reproductive health and rights, including safe abortion. This announcement was published and celebrated by various institutions across the world. There is widespread optimism that this bill will be passed.

Widespread coverage of the conference in national and international media

Highlights and key messages from the speeches and discussions held at the conference were captured in national and international media platforms, from TV broadcasts and print media on national platforms in Sierra Leone to the New York Times and BBC World Service.

Girls and young people felt valued, included and that their advocacy had a strategic impact

In addition to having the girl and youth only spaces, girls and young people were panellists and facilitators in the main conference, giving them a chance to share their perspectives and engage with donors and civil society actors directly. Following the conference, we held debrief conversations with girls and young people and across

these conversations, girls and young people shared their gratitude for the inclusive space; designed by and for young people.

“I came out of the space, really more confident. And also with this fresh desire and this fresh passion to you know, keep fighting and advocating for young women. Because it was very beautiful, rubbing minds with everybody. And there was just this energy. I don't know, from the first day of the conference, there was this energy that was emanating from the women – very, very positive energy. And it just fuelled my passion more, like I came out of the space and when I came back, I told myself, yeah, I have work to do. I've been doing work but yes, I have work to do, I just want to do better. I want to keep impacting. That was what the place made me feel. It was beautiful networking with people. It was like, it was amazing. I still cannot get over it. It feels very surreal.”

- Cheasobuol “Cheche” Edwin Ogar (20).

“I was given all the safe space to discuss issues affecting persons with disabilities with regards to our sexual reproductive health right without being discriminated against. So it makes me braver to speak up for my rights.”

- Kadiatu Mansaray (25)

“The radical inclusion of all made me feel in a space where I belong and matter in terms of making my views and opinions heard as a youth”

- Amb James Samba (21)

7: We Can do Better: Lessons on inclusion

As feminists, we envision a world where every person can live with safety, in their full dignity and freedom. But our spaces do not exist in a vacuum. Unless we are deliberate, the very same power dynamics we seek to dismantle will reappear. What does it mean to offer solidarity to folks pushed to the margins in the spaces we create? We cannot always control or predict the behaviours of others, but organisers and conveners should be attentive to how they will respond to these behaviours, especially when they compromise the safety and wellbeing of communities who have been most marginalised by dominant systems. As folks from the queer community shared: *“The offer of safety and welcome is weighty - it is dependent on mutual understanding, respect and kindness, things which we cannot guarantee, even amongst feminists. Being told we are welcome is comforting, more important is that we are made to feel welcome with intention, care and consistency.”*

In particular, feminist spaces are not automatically welcoming of LGBTQIA+ persons and are not always ready and willing to accommodate the needs and rights of activists with disabilities. French, Portuguese and Arabic speakers, as well as those who do not speak coloniser languages at all, including many of our constituents in Sierra Leone, are very often excluded from transnational spaces where English dominance is still so unquestioned even within justice movements working for self-determination. We know how compounding these exclusions are when they are layered on top of one another, as queer, disabled, French-speaking activists experience at the conference. Without care, safety, and accountability, the foundation of our feminist movements will remain unsteady. Equally, when we practise creating accessible, welcoming, multilingual gatherings we strengthen our

capacity to build the societies we dream of. After all, movements are people. Without each other, there is no movement.

In the spirit of accountability and in the hope that other space holders can learn from the experiences and challenges of LGBTQIA+, disability and language justice, we share some of the processes, practices, and places we fell down in organising the 10th ACSHR.

Accessibility for Disabled Activists

Accessibility was a priority for us from the very start of the planning process. In addition to Humanity and Inclusion acting as a vital partner of the national steering committee, we ensured that our planning steering committees had people with disabilities as members. Furthermore, we allocated significant funding to making the space as inclusive and accessible as possible; from covering the costs of personal assistance and personal care attendants to attend the conference, hiring sign language interpreters, to shipping mechanical lift parts. In the time available to us, however, we didn't achieve what we'd hoped.

We learned some hard lessons about what it means to host an accessible and inclusive conference space for people with disabilities, particularly in Sierra Leone. Since then, we've reflected deeply and honestly as a team. We've reached out to some participants with disabilities to understand how they experienced the conference. We've also been in conversation with the Disability Rights Fund (DRF), a critical friend throughout our planning process. There are two key lessons we offer up with the intention of taking these lessons forward and with the hope that others may take something from our learning and bring it to their spaces.

- **Be in direct dialogue with people with disabilities:** D.R.F recommended this in our early planning days. We reached out to every participant who registered through us and self-identified as having accessibility requirements. This helped us build a picture of how we could support individuals, and also build relationships before the conference started. In addition, we partnered with a Disabled Persons' Organisation Again, alongside steering committee (formed a few months into the planning process) members. Having people with disabilities in our planning structures and processes ensured that we received advice on the agenda, venue, transportation and accommodation plans, preparing us to support people with disabilities in all their diversity. If we were doing it again, we'd bring a partner in from the beginning to support the conference to ensure they're providing insight across the different conference production workstreams with enough time for us to execute this advice.
- **Be realistic and own limitations up front:** Accessibility in Sierra Leone is challenging, particularly because there was only one building in the whole country able to host the conference. We hoped we could overcome some of the physical accessibility challenges. We brought in architects and engineers, we shipped in mechanical lift parts, and we worked with local partners and experts. In the time available to us, we didn't achieve what we'd hoped. If we had scenario-planned sooner, we could have been more upfront with participants with physical accessibility needs and managed everyone's expectations. It's important that where accommodations cannot be made then this is communicated in advance.

We use this experience and our learning to fuel our practice - to do better.

These lessons are crowdsourced from across the Purposeful team, with special thanks to Anisie Byukanisie. We are also grateful to conference participants Monica Yeanie Ghaliwa (Disability Activist and a With and For Girls Advisor), Salamatu Laggah (Disability Activist and Conference Youth Steering Committee Member) and our Disability Rights Fund colleagues, Kerry Thompson and Jen Bokoff.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion

We start this section by naming our gratitude to the generous contributions, ideas and advice from representatives from several organisations, individual activists and funders working on LGBTQIA+ rights in Africa, and LGBTQIA+ activists on the Youth Steering Committee. We are particularly grateful to I.S.D.A.O for sponsoring a group of LGBTQIA+ activists to participate in the conference through a grant to Purposeful. I.S.D.A.O also shared their guidance for inclusive interpretation when we realised we would face a challenge engaging an interpretation team prepared to use LGBTQIA+-affirming language. Their openness and honesty as a critical collaborator was vital. Through planning calls and pre-conference dialogues, activists generously advised us on the programme, security measures (including at the airport, during the conference and on the return back home) and networking opportunities. Their partnership informed:

1. An action plan on LGBTQIA+ inclusion and safety that was shared with staff members;
2. A briefing pack for LGBTQIA+ activists travelling to the conference;

3. A briefing given to airport staff, drivers and security;
4. An alternative VIP arrival option for those anticipating challenges at immigration;
5. A networking session and security briefing on Day 1;
6. Two briefings with the Sierra Leone Police Force and Sierra Leone Armed Forces on zero tolerance to harassment and abuse with a specific focus on transphobic and homophobic behaviour;
7. A number of planning meetings with the security services, key Line Ministries and Immigration Services to secure a commitment that all conference delegates and partners would be assured of their safety, security and freedom while they were in the country or at immigration;
8. Retained three human rights lawyers should any activists face legal challenges or arrest during the conference.

Even with good intention and a commitment to inclusion, LGBTQIA+ activists still did not feel safe, seen and welcome throughout the conference. It is clear that this planning needed to have started months earlier. For anyone considering hosting such a conference, we recommend partnering with an LGBTQIA+ rights organisation or hiring expert consultants to advise and accompany the process from the very beginning. In particular, we needed to dedicate greater attention to the programme to ensure that sexual and gender based violence is discussed with nuances related to queer and trans women, intersex folks and those outside the gender binary.

For example, though the nature of this violation is different to FGM: many intersex folks are also survivors of genital mutilation to enforce harmful gender norms. In addition, when it comes to sexual health and reproductive rights, heterosexual women are not the only ones interested in and affected by policies related to pregnancy, parenting, contraception or abortion.

Feminist convenings have, and should continue to be, spaces where we build understanding between individuals, collectives / organisations and in turn, movements, and we must organise convenings that are safe for all participants and ensure that we hear from people with different identities and experiences, because ultimately, feminism is for everybody.

Read more about how feminism is for everybody [on this page of the CHEVS website](#).

Language Justice

There was a team of interpreters hired to ensure that all participants were able to understand and engage with each other. There were a number of challenges regarding interpretation, particularly for Francophone participants. As with many of the challenges of this conference, some of these were practical and infrastructural (for example, there are no female Arabic graduates in the country, and almost no female French translators). With more lead time, more intentionality, and more resources, we could have prioritised:

- ***Social justice-rooted interpreters:*** Ensuring that interpretation in all the languages needed is available and that the interpreters have a social justice

framework (ex: anti-racist, anti-ableist, queer- and gender-affirming language) in which they interpret so that it honours the people and the space.

- **Interpretation outside of sessions:** Outside of sessions, participants struggled to engage with others, including support staff. It is important to have interpreters available to support communication outside of formal sessions, for example, an interpreter at the information desk.
- **Language diversity:** Language dominance is so normalised that it often goes unnoticed. Creating content and spaces in multiple languages and making language diversity the norm is a way to address this. Also holding spaces, especially of power, in Indigenous, sign, and most often marginalised languages, is a critical step towards dismantling language dominance.
- **Translation of written materials:** Lack of information creates barriers. Thus, all materials must be translated and packaged in accessible formats.
- **Care and safety:** Develop language protocols and guidelines that ensure there is a common understanding, resources, and support for people to respect and honour each other.

8: In Closing

“When I came back, I told myself, yeah, I have work to do. I've been doing work but yes, I have work to do... I want to keep impacting. That was what the place made me feel.”

Cheasobuol “Cheche” Edwin Ogar, Nigeria.

The 10th ACSHR was a life-affirming reminder of the power of our collective. We go to the root of violence with radical love. We are filled with respect and warmth for our feminist siblings across the Continent and beyond, who are transforming communities every day. We echo Cheche – we all have work to do to create the future we imagine together.

We each have a part to play in ending sexual and gender based violence, including FGM and child marriage. There is a role for all of us in expanding access to safe abortions and disrupting abortion stigma. It will take the collective to uproot shame around sex, affirm that we all deserve pleasure and ensure that young people can access accurate, non-judgemental sexuality education. We love to see the #collectiveatwork, building a world where we all belong.

To truly honour the labour, the vulnerability, the hard-won wisdom that was shared during the conference, we must take the learning, reflections and manifestos forward. For this reason, we have prioritised documenting the conference, with a set of briefs on key themes and reports and manifestos from the Girls' Summit and Youth Pre-Conference. We invite you to engage with these materials in your work.

While the impact of the conference will be evident in partnerships and collaborations in years to come, we have already started to receive feedback on how participation in the conference has informed advocacy across the continent, from abortion rights in Nigeria to bridging divides between feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements on the Continent, to the birth of new funding calls, to so much more. This is just the beginning of #collectiveatwork. The world is burning. We need each other more than ever. Together we might just lay the seeds of a world where we can all live in safety, dignity, and freedom.

Acknowledgements

Authors: The Purposeful Team

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