# Youth Pre-Conference

## Nothing For Us, Without Us!

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Introduction

Young people from 41 African countries came together in Freetown for the two-day Youth Pre-Conference from the 27th to 28th June 2022. From Moyamba (Sierra Leone), Cairo (Egypt), Machakos (Kenya) to Cape Town (South Africa) and beyond, 350 diverse young feminists who represented youth in Africa came together. LGBTQIA+ youth, activists far along and those just beginning their journey of resistance, young people with disabilities, poets, musicians, revolutionary thinkers and movement builders attended the pre-conference - a space for young people, designed by young people.

The Youth Pre-Conference was shaped by a youth steering committee. Participants reflected on their feminist journeys and used feminist analysis to understand the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence. They disrupted stigma and shame around sex and pleasure and learned practical advocacy skills. And they built relationships, danced and celebrated together. A powerful Youth Manifesto proclaims participants’ collective demands and vision for the future.
We Are Powerful: the importance of youth-led convening

Young people have the experience and expertise to meaningfully contribute to and lead bold solutions to spark change. They are even more powerful when they connect across countries and movements to learn and dream together. What they need are accountability, resources and support from older generations; accountable intergenerational relationships that honour their leadership; resources to fuel their work; and support to convene and build transnational solidarity. The purpose of the Youth Pre-Conference was to create a space to nurture solidarity among young activists while providing opportunities for them to present critical learning to funders, programmers, and policymakers on the impact of sexual and gender-based violence on young people’s lives. In order to successfully do this, we knew the content and methodology had to be designed by young people themselves.

The Youth Pre-Conference was co-designed by 14 young activists from across Africa, with different backgrounds, identities, passions and involvement in movements. They co-created a process for designing the convening, determining the content as well as the methods that would be used to explore each theme. What came out of this collective process was a rich agenda that prioritised spaces to hear and reflect on each other’s experiences: intergenerational dialogue with feminist activists, funders and implementing organisations; discussion-based sessions facilitated by young people to help prepare them to engage in the main conference; and moments to build relationships, to dance, dream and strategise together. Because of our experience supporting the youth steering committee and the success
of the Youth Pre-Conference, we firmly believe and know that it is essential to involve young people in designing their own convening spaces.

**Key steps to setting up a youth steering committee & co-creating an agenda**

**Step 1: Establish what an ideal committee would look like**

Depending on the theme and objectives of the convening, decide what the ideal committee would look like, from the diversity of skills, identities, location, experiences, and even the way of thinking. Use this to create your outreach strategy, selection criteria and application process.

**Step 2: Send out a call for collaborators (a youth steering committee)**

Share a call (open/closed) inviting young people from across the Continent to join the steering committee. Use different forms of media where possible, and ask your partners across the Continent to share the call in their local networks. Be clear about what the selection criteria and remuneration for their involvement will be, so people only apply if they fit the criteria and are happy with the proposed remuneration.

**Remember: Pay young people…fairly!**

A note on remuneration: young people’s time and knowledge must be acknowledged and compensated. This may not always necessarily be in the form of money but it must be in a manner that is fair. Develop a process of identifying what this may look like in your context, and have a clear rationale for the rate/type of remuneration you provide. The youth steering committee shared feedback that while the full scholarship to attend the conference and small stipend were appreciated, a more
significant stipend that acknowledges the time, investment, and value they brought was needed.

This message was echoed throughout the conference. Valuing young people’s insights does not mean just creating space for them on panels or decision-making spaces, but also paying them fairly for the work they do.

**Step 3: Shortlist**

Set up a small team within your organisation and/or partner organisations to agree on a shortlisting criteria (given that many of the applicants would meet your basic criteria) and then shortlist the applications. For this Youth Pre-Conference, the diversity of the group was key - their locations, thematic area of focus, the strategies they use in their work, their identity, and their reasons for wanting to participate in the steering committee, were used to create a shortlist.

Important note: previous experience in similar roles was not a requirement.

**Step 4: Clarify your offer**

Invite the shortlisted candidates to join the committee, clarifying the anticipated time commitment, expected deliverables and compensation you offer for their support - that way all committee members are clear on what exactly they are committing to.

Draft a short Memorandum of Understanding so these aspects are clear and documented for them to refer to throughout the process.
14 youth activists from Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Benin, Rwanda, and the host country Sierra Leone, co-designed the agenda and methodology for the youth pre-conference - including representation from the LGBTQIA+ community and young people with disabilities.

Step 5: Agree on the process for co-creation

In your first call, design the process to co-create the agenda and the conference, so that all committee members take ownership of the process and the end result. This approach to the conference led to regular calls not just to co-design, but for check-ins and learning about each other's work in their respective countries.

Step 6: Align on common values to build trust

Don’t overlook the importance of clearly stating the shared values of the group. For us, we take a feminist approach and commit to creating a respectful, inclusive, tolerant, and safe environment. Agreeing to the shared values of the committee builds trust and accountability. It is also a tool for resolving conflicts, because the committee can return to their stated values when making a difficult decision.

Step 7: Encourage dreaming, then think practically

Budget and other limitations often stifle creativity. Starting with what type of space and conversations you want to have and how you want conference participants to feel, supports creativity. Once all of the ideas are generated, you can think through how to make them a reality given the constraints you face regarding your budget, time, speaker availability, and beyond.
Step 8: Share the draft agenda for feedback and input

Send the agenda to potential speakers and conference partners for feedback and ideas. Discuss all input with the steering committee to finalise the agenda. The steering committee should have the freedom to accept or reject proposed changes.

Highlights and Reflections from the Youth Pre-Conference

This conference will be a cocoon, in which we’ll enter as caterpillars and come out as beautiful butterflies.
- Vicky the Poet

The Youth Pre-Conference at the 10th Africa Conference for Sexual and Reproductive Health (ACSHR) was full of revolutionary feminist discussions and powerful reflections. Following the conference we heard back from 59 young people through an online survey, as well as conducting a debrief call with 40 young people to capture the highlights and reflections from the conference. The best way to share these reflections and what happened over the two days is to share some snippets from the various sessions and the powerful Youth Manifesto produced at the end of the convening.

Solid Foundations: feminist consciousness raising

The root of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), specifically violence by men against girls and women, is in patriarchy. SGBV is a manifestation of patriarchy in
our societies. Therefore, to eliminate it, we must understand patriarchy and in turn, feminism as the avenue for eliminating SGBV.

One of the main aims of the Youth Pre-Conference was to clarify what feminism is and why it is critical to eliminating SGBV. This shared analysis created a solid foundation for the discussions to be held in the youth and main conferences. The discussion on feminist consciousness-raising was held by Purity Kagwiria, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Yah Vallah Parwon, and Ola Abagun. That discussion inspired the short reflection piece below.

“For so long we have heard that feminism is un-African, an imposed concept that does not align with African beliefs and practices. It has also been framed as something that we, Africans, had to be taught - something we could not be experts in – that we were merely recipients and not producers of feminist knowledge, thought and practice.

Yet, so many of us know that even before we could name it as feminism, we had an instinctive understanding that this is not how we were meant to live our lives. We were not meant to live in oppression, to be seen as persons less deserving of dignity, safety, and freedom. Many of us have stories of when the first spark of resistance was ignited - burning questions that you could not let go of, a deep sense that something you’ve witnessed or experienced was not right… it was unjust, a moment where you felt so strongly about something that you were compelled to speak up.”
“I had seen so many violent things happen to my grandmother and women in my space, and I thought that there are just too many ways that we aren’t allowed to speak. That’s what continues to fuel my feminism!”
– Purity Kagwiria, Director With and For Girls, Purposeful

Many more stories have been shared between us on how our great grandmothers resisted in their homes, and in the fight for Africa’s political independence, and women’s roles in the new Africa. They too, never used the word feminism, but stood for what they knew in their bones was just. African feminists have produced knowledge, catalysed meaningful change and cultivated movements to sustain this change and continue the fight for our collective liberation.

This knowledge is usually missing from the history books we read at school – dismissed and deemed invalid by those who have decided what is meaningful, what is most representative of the “truth.” It has been passed on orally, in whispers from generation to generation, slipping through colonial cracks. “We are communal people,” Purity explains. This is true of Africans and this is especially true of African Feminists. We learn from each other, with one another, and from one another’s struggles. For each panelist, the role of others in their journeys to becoming feminists was clear; pointing to the fact that raising feminist consciousness is a process which happens in relationship. We walk this road together, welcoming others on our way, creating space to be heard - to be believed. This walk is intergenerational. It is powerful to meet and read the words of those who look like us, love like us, struggle like us - of those who want to listen to us. On this road there are bumps, potholes as deep as the ones we have all navigated at some point on the
African continent - deep, filled with sand, and covered only to be uncovered, worn down, exposed once more.

_We cannot liberate ourselves if we do not understand what we are liberating ourselves from, and if we do not know and collectively define what life could look and feel like beyond the existing systems and structures._

Read more about African Feminists on [this African Feminist Forum page](#).

“Feminism is an instrument for work. It helps me understand injustices, violence against women, abuses of power….it helps me transform myself and those around me.”

- Zeedah Meirhofer-Mangeli

Because feminists seek radical change of the status quo, they are often met with backlash, particularly from those who benefit from things as they are. Holding this identity is not easy. We face losses, exhaustion, and have to constantly defend the spaces we create and occupy.

“Naming ourselves feminist in our own settings and cultures means we sometimes lose friends…our gains get politicised, get co-opted, and sometimes you feel like you’re back at square one…But I’d rather be a feminist and build solidarity with my community because it’s freeing!”

- Yah Vallah Parwon
“It’s [feminism] an identity that sometimes comes with challenges…you enter some spaces where it doesn’t look like you should be a feminist in those spaces, but that’s exactly what feminism is, taking your identity into spaces that don’t want your identity to shine.”

– Ola

We take pause, we lean on one another, we come together, we laugh, we cry, we dance, we mourn, and we are reminded once more that we are not alone. There are others like us, building power, resisting, sparking, and sustaining change.

**Tackling SGBV - young people share their experiences**

**Reflections on Resistance**

Activists shared their various forms of resistance and the reflections that have come from the collective work towards tackling sexual and gender-based violence. They shared their experiences transforming norms and beliefs, building movements, and sparking national advocacy campaigns across a range of issues. In conversation, activists named the forms of violence and other ways in which patriarchy manifests: the lack of bodily autonomy, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage, homophobia, and so on.

There were common themes from across the Continent, and one in particular resonated with all participants:
There is often very little political will for change, so change will only come from building strong movements to apply consistent pressure for change.

Sustained collective action is essential to sparking change, and for collective action to occur, political consciousness must be raised. Young people must support their communities to unlearn the long-held harmful beliefs and norms, so that they can join movements working towards the liberation of girls, women and gender non-conforming persons and the transformation of their communities. There will be backlash, but sustained resistance will lead to change. Without this radical hope that change is possible, movements will dwindle.

“There are some wins and there are some losses, but you have to keep going… you have to evolve, you have to keep the conversation going… you have to, have to keep at it.”

– Ebun, Panellist discussion: Youth Power, Youth Rights: how young activists across the Continent and beyond are demanding access to reproductive justice.

“[I learned]…that when we work collectively, we achieve a lot of progress.”

- Youth Participant, debrief call

“The elimination of #SGBV will only be achieved through the leadership, innovation, creativity and passion of young Africans coming together in a collective endeavour both for themselves and future generations. It is our responsibility to listen and act.”

- Babatunde A. Ahonsi, UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone
**Hearing from Survivors**

Survivors shared their experiences of violence. This space was an opportunity for people to hear from and ask survivors questions, building a deeper understanding of the reality of different forms of violence in girls’ and women’s lives. The storytelling also serves to break down isolation and shame, and participants reflected that they “were able to share things that in most spaces you’re not allowed to share.”

One participant noted that she wished she had been able to take part in such conversations sooner. In the session titled, "The Human Library: Youth activists share stories of survivorship and solidarity,” survivors shared stories of FGM and child marriage. They also shared what helped them on their journeys and called for change:

“My past is in the present. These things are still happening. Women are still living these stories.”
- Participant

“Young people should have spaces to speak up and speak out. We are supporting young people by having workshops. But are we listening to them? Are we asking them what they want? They should be involved in the design of programmes.”
- Participant

While difficult to hear, these stories are essential to tell, so that we do not allow silence to protect the systems and practices that are hurting girls and women. When
we listen to survivors, we are awake to the realities of what the continuation of these practices means for girls and women.

**Let's Talk about Sex, Pleasure, and Shame**

Participants appreciated the opportunity to talk about sex openly and beyond Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and sexual violence. Sex, pleasure, and shame are hardly, if ever, discussed in settings like these, so having multiple opportunities for open discussion was valuable for young people. In all the sessions, the panellists created space for participants to ask questions that they often do not get to ask, from self-pleasure to unpacking the shame that surrounds sex, given the religious and cultural contexts in African countries.

“Growing up in South Africa, my knowledge about sex was about HIV, and it was centred on fear.”

“In Morocco young people don’t talk about sex and it was surprising in a good way to hear young people openly talk about sex.”

“[I learnt that] sometimes shame comes from within ourselves and not just from the outside.”

“Sex, pleasure and shame! - how challenging it can be to talk about but also how MUCH interest there is in having an open, safe space to talk.”
“I gained a lot about the sex conversation - learning sex position and how to satisfy a woman - I learned that the clitoris is pleasurable and gained understanding on orgasms.”

Building Advocacy Skills and Gaining Knowledge

There were a range of sessions designed to build the skills and knowledge of young people. They were designed to build young people’s understanding on topics they may not necessarily have access to information about, learning about the various responses to SGBV from actors like UNFPA, Mott Macdonald and Plan International and sessions designed specifically to equip them with the skills and confidence to challenge oppressive systems and structures.

UNFPA Reflects:

We co-led two break-out sessions with youth on SGBV and SHR. The sessions provided the young people participating a platform to discuss these critical issues in a safe space. Both sessions were designed by the youth themselves with support from UNFPA, and the Youth Steering Committee, who also co-facilitated the sessions.

Session on SGBV: Creating a safe space for open discussion on strategies to prevent and respond to gender based violence.

This session consisted of participant reflections and their communities’ perceptions of SGBV, including on stigma, shame and victim-blaming. It was then followed by a short presentation by UNFPA’s Gender & Rights Specialist, Sonia Gilroy, including basic concepts, causes, and consequences. A panel, including youth activists and
experts, discussed challenges, lessons learned, possible solutions, and ways forward.

**Breakout session on SHR:** Creating a safe space for open discussions around sex and SHR including family planning, teenage pregnancy, and safer sex practices. This session consisted of a short presentation on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights over the Life Course, by Dr Stephen Mupeta, Specialist on Maternal Health / Midwifery from UNFPA Sierra Leone. An icebreaker then got participants comfortable talking about topics related to sex, and this was followed by an interactive session on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and considerations for youth advocacy by Mrs Maria Bakaroudis, CSE Specialist from UNFPA Regional Office of East and Southern Africa. Panel discussions consisted of youth activists from different countries and volunteers from the audience, and concluded with a shared Q&A.

Key takeaways included:

- The amount of stigma and victim blaming directed at SGBV survivors on the Continent hinders them to seek help and support. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring a supportive environment for survivors to come forward.

- The importance of making information and services accessible to everyone, including persons with different types of disabilities, persons living in rural areas, LGBTQIA+ youth, and those out of school. Information and services should also target boys.

Lessons learned from lockdowns during COVID-19:

- SGBV happens mainly in the home.
SGBV and SRHR services need to be prioritized during crises such as pandemics and Governments need to prepare for future crises.

Young people, including persons with disabilities, have to be involved in decision-making and on formation as well as implementation of youth friendly policies and everything that involves young people. Nothing for young people without young people.

All the Youth Pre-Conference sessions were created with the intention of sharing practical advice on different forms of advocacy. For example, ‘Activist-led documentation of violations against women and girls in crisis/emergency contexts’ was a session led by Fidaa Zaanin, an activist from Palestine. Fidaa’s session explored documentation as a form of activism, the reasons we document violations (specifically SGBV) and generated tips from the facilitator and audience on how to navigate risk for activists as well as those whose stories we document.

The reasons we document violations

- Justice
- You are not alone
- Education & awareness
- Building a movement
- A tool of advocacy

“We are not voiceless, there are people who silence us, speak over us, and take the mic from us. That’s why it’s important to centre our own narratives and tell our own stories.”
“By documenting, we are challenging the system that keeps us silent. So we receive threats and we are pushed into self-censorship to keep ourselves safe…we know there are risks and that’s why we need to think collectively.”

- Fidaa Zaanin

Spaces to Connect and Collaborate

Bringing people together is key to sparking and sustaining effective movements. The youth steering committee built space specifically for networking into the agenda. In addition, people connected via the conference app, including starting chats that others could contribute to and connect with each other on specific topics. Several discussions were held and started by young people. For example, in a chat titled “Feminist Journey” a participant shared about their feminist journey, and in another discussion a youth participant who is a member of the FGM Global Youth Consortium invited other youth participants to join the consortium.

The Youth Zone

A physical space was also set up just for youth to decompress and connect with each other. The space had photographs by Girls Behind the Lens and Scheherazade Tillet’s ‘Black Girl Play’ exhibition.

“I enjoyed the deliberate attempt to create a space for people to network and share ideas as well as collaborate…”

- Fidaa Zaanin
Advice for Future Space-Holders and Lessons Learned

- **More Free Time in the Agenda:** Have more spaces in the agenda left open to support deeper engagement through small group discussions and meetings with funders/stakeholders. In addition, this would also make space for rest; a pre-conference followed by a main conference can be very tiring.

- **Time to be Tourists:** Build in as much time as possible for participants to see the city/town/location of the conference, so that they see more than just the hotel and conference venue. Let them see the magic and beauty of the place you have invited them to.

- **Connecting After the Conference:** Find ways to connect people after the conference; whether it be an optional Facebook / WhatsApp group, leaving the conference app open for longer or sharing a shared document with emails of those who’d like to connect further.

- **Share recordings:** If recorded, make conference sessions available afterwards so people who missed sessions can still access those conversations. If the agenda has concurrent sessions, people miss conversations they are eager to be involved in.

- **Engaging politicians:** Create spaces to engage with the political leaders who are present, as young people often do not get the opportunity to engage with
them directly. For example, the Mayor of Freetown and the President of Sierra Leone were present and youth from Sierra Leone would have loved to engage with them beyond only hearing their speeches.

When Do We Want Change?....Now! The Youth Manifesto

On the final afternoon of the Youth Pre-Conference, 300 participants came together to collectively draft the Youth Manifesto. Over the course of two extraordinary hours, we worked together to build a clear statement of the power and possibility of youth-led change. To ensure that the voices of all the youth were heard, stations were set up with key themes identified by the youth steering committee. Themes included Bodily Autonomy, Disability Justice, FGM, Sex and Pleasure and many more. Participants visited each station, sharing their thoughts, ideas and demands with a facilitator at each station or simply writing on a post-it note. All of this was then compiled to develop the Youth Manifesto draft, which was read back to the youth in plenary and finalised using their feedback. The manifesto was presented at a powerful plenary of the ACSHR, a loud and proud statement to the full conference delegation.

“Young people are not asking for a favour! We are demanding our rights!”
- Josephine Kamara, Senior Advocacy Manager, Purposeful

10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights

The Youth Manifesto
We are youth activists from across Africa gathered here in Freetown for the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights. To be together like this, all in one space, young activists from across the continent, is to reaffirm what we all know inside us. To show with such abundant clarity that we are powerful, already, each of us, and even more so, together.

So many conversations, so much learning, sharing, discovering, that in every corner of every community in every country across our Continent we are organising, building, we are building a world free from violence every day. We are activists, feminists, organisers. We wear those labels proudly, knowing that it is us who promotes equality, challenges government impunity, and creates space for others to speak up.

Every day, everywhere, young people are speaking up and demanding spaces, seizing the moment and breaking stereotypes, we are documenting our stories and shining light on violations; we are sparking movements and we are sustaining them too.

We are so many of us, all over this Continent, our stories so similar, our struggles so connected, and we also stand clear in our differences, clear in our identities.

We are activists from the LGBTQIA+ community. We are disowned by our families, shut out from the services and systems that are our right. We are excluded, our right to express who we are loudly, freely, denied. We need justice movements to stand in solidarity with us. To bring a strong power analysis. Because our struggles are all
deeply connected. We need to connect, strategise and develop a shared voice…none of us are free while some of us are not.

We are disability rights activists. We are human, sexual beings, multiple identities. We are not considered, denied access, in so many ways at so many times. Rejected, shut out from systems. And all of this just means more violence. Movements need to work collectively, intentionally, to amplify our experience, beyond ticking boxes. We have so many of the answers, inside us, between us, our leadership needs to be heeded. Nothing about us without us.

We are survivors. All of us. There is so much we are surviving. Every day surviving the indignity of exclusion, the horror of violence. So much violence in so many forms it overwhelms us to name it but name it we must.

Our countries are failing us. So many of us married too young. We demand the chance to choose when, if and who we marry. We need law change. We need culture change. We need access to meaningful, comprehensive sexuality education.

We are bleeding. So many of us. You are cutting us. Literally. Our clitoris. Why would you do this to us? There is no religion anywhere that says this should be done to us. We demand you listen to us. Right now. Immediately. This cannot be.

We need support to heal physically and emotionally. We need legal protection; this means safe ways to report cases, access to free services and the political will to prosecute perpetrators.
It's impossible, almost comical, the constraints put on the most basic of resources. Without those resources the power imbalance is untenable, entirely unlivable. It makes bodily autonomy impossible. We need access to meaningful opportunities and resources. To earn a living. The basis of dignity, of possibility.

We need you to trust us. Fund us. You’re shrinking us - the civic space we are trying to occupy. Doors shut. Tables full. Pockets empty. You need to pay us. Actually. Properly. For our labour. All this labour. We will no longer let ourselves be used for performative inclusion.

We need to name this clearly, we want you to listen carefully. At the root of all of this is patriarchy. Extraction, imperialism, homophobia, transphobia, so many ways we are pushed down and pushed under and shut out. Subordinate. But we will not be silent. Despite it all.

Despite it all, we demand more. We claim more. Autonomy, over our bodies, the right to choose. When we marry, when we have sex. When we become mothers, if we become mothers. Intimacy, pleasure, possibility, beyond just pathology. Beyond Reproduction. Beyond the binary. Liberation. Entirely. We are more than what we have survived.

We are powerful. So powerful. Look at us. Over 300 of us. We wrote this together. In a matter of hours. Imagine when we run the world.
In addition to the Youth Manifesto, September-December of 2022 will see Purposeful and the youth steering committee developing a policy brief informed by the rich discussions held with all 350 young people to form this Youth Manifesto.

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