

The Politics of Transnational Convening Spaces

Doing more and better for young feminist activists

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Introduction

In July 2023, thousands gathered in Rwanda for the Women Deliver conference. Like many international conferences, it was a complex and contested space. Complex, because it sought to bring together a 'broad-church' of participants and collaborators under the banner of gender equality. And contested, because of the disconnect between rhetoric and the underlying politics and practices of the space and those who occupied it. The experiences of young feminist activists in and at Women Deliver map very closely against the challenges young activists navigate in their interactions with formal development and philanthropic institutions, and multilateral and international spaces writ large. Perhaps the most consistent challenge at Women Deliver for young activists - especially those attending an international conference for the first time - was how to reconcile the language of feminism with their embodied experience of the space.

Even for the most seasoned of us, Women Deliver 2023 seemed to offer a particularly bewildering disconnect between language and reality. The highly visible instances of anti-rights actors being given prominent platforms is a clear example of harm. What is less acknowledged - and examined - is the ease with which both INGOs and State Actors so fluently deploy the language of feminist movements without tangible actions underpinning their words. More precisely, we know that *resources* for frontline feminist activism are just not flowing. Despite a myriad of panels on feminist funding - including resourcing girls and young feminist-led activism - actual dollar amounts continue to be just a drop in the ocean of what is actually needed.

How do we organise against this backdrop, when the saying and the doing have come so unstuck from each other? What does it look like to demand accountability when the language of our movements is played back to us so fluently? How, as adult allies, do we support young activists to navigate this complexity and carve out their own paths of care and political clarity?

Because we cannot deny the value of transnational spaces in sparking change, collaboration and intergenerational action. We know from youth grantees, advisors and collaborators that when organised properly, these spaces provide rest and respite, a place to build connection and community, to collectively strategise and advocate, and spark cross-movement collaboration. They also provide opportunities to connect with and influence decision-makers, funders and other power-holders face to face, forming relationships to be leveraged for policy and advocacy change purposes at the national and community levels.

This publication is a collective attempt to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of spaces like Women Deliver from the experience of young feminist activists, and those who accompany them. We seek to document and learn so that we can do better - and advocate for others to do better too. And in order to do this, we must first name what is not working, and how our practice can adapt to respond to what girls and young activists are telling us they need. Through this publication, we share many practical and tactical possibilities for doing more and better for young feminists in international convening spaces.

But in order to adapt our practice, we need first to reground in our politics. The line between *aspiration* and *co-optation* feels particularly thin at this particular moment in our collective work. We invite you to read on to learn about the praxis of transforming these spaces towards a shared community that really does live into the promise of a political feminist vision for the world.

Publication overview

In Chapter 1, in collaboration with ATHENA Network, Community Care Collective, RESURJ and Nala Feminist Collective, we reflect on the importance of alternative political spaces for girls and young feminists at more formal, traditional convenings and conferences including the power of intergenerationally-held space. We explore the politics of physical space and how alternative convenings can be powerful places for transnational political analysis, movement strengthening, and importantly, rest, joy, and care. The chapter closes with a case study exploring MADRE's intergenerational approach to advocacy through their work with Indigenous groups and organisations.

Chapter 2 explores the practical experiences of girls and young feminists, including queer and disabled activists, at Women Deliver and in similar transnational spaces. We reflect on our own experience providing travel grants, drawing on learnings from the With and for Girls Fund, and we put forward a more holistic approach to accompaniment.

In Chapter 3, in collaboration with CHEVS, we lift up the stories of some of the activists we met at Women Deliver who have written letters to the organisers. We listen to their pain, their fatigue, and we reflect on and share their call to action to do better.

Drawing from previous chapters, we offer recommendations to funders, conference organisers and other institutions who are complicit in creating and holding space, including NGOs and multilaterals.

We all have a responsibility to do better and remember that our feminism is a practice and a project. We must move beyond the rhetoric of supporting young feminist movements and resource what it takes to truly sustain them, in terms of financial resources, as well as staff time to deepen our own political education, to build relationships with girls and young feminists, and to provide the type of holistic accompaniment that is required to fully support their safe, inclusive, and meaningful engagement in transnational spaces.

Chapter 1: The Politics of Space in Transnational Conferences and Convenings: Why and how to resource alternative political spaces

This chapter was written in collaboration with Catherine Nyambura from ATHENA Network, Lily Dong Li Rosengard from Community Care Collective, Nana Abuelsoud and Laura Valenciano from RESURJ and Dr Syeda Re'em Hussain and Aya Chebbi from Nala Feminist Collective.

For years, feminist groups and collectives have been creating alternative political spaces during more traditional convenings, conferences and advocacy processes. We at Purposeful hosted the Girls' Resistance Space at Women Deliver in Rwanda, July 2023, building on learnings from the African Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR), which we hosted in Sierra Leone in 2022. For this chapter, we spoke with partners and collaborators at ATHENA Network, Nala Feminist Collective (Nalafem Collective), RESURJ and the newly formed Community Care Collective - all of which create girl- and young feminist-focused zones and spaces at Women Deliver, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Commission of Population and Development (CPD) and other global and regional fora. We wanted to understand why alternative political spaces are needed, what makes them political, and how they can best be supported and lifted up.

What we learned re-enforced a core belief we hold. Space is political: who controls it, who comes into it and how, who holds relationships within it and how decisions are made about the space. As put forward by feminist scholar, Srilatha Batliwala; "Understanding power in terms of both power structures and power relations is very important"¹. When analysing spaces of power, we cannot divorce structural from relational power as they hold one another up. Conference organisers and convenings have the power to "determine who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda"². They also hold power over the space itself. This takes the form of physical exhibition booths, access to negotiating tables, and power to access the main, more often broadcast, high level plenary stages.

¹ Batliwala, S. (2020) All About Power. CREA

² Batliwala, S. (2020) All About Power. CREA

“These advocacy spaces replicate structures that aren’t as inviting or easy to navigate as they should be. We need to recognise that those structures are still in place and a lot of the spaces for women and girls’ advocacy still responds to those structures. They can be very overwhelming.”

Nana Abuelsoud, RESURJ

When we challenge how it is centrally held and controlled, when we co-create new, alternative spaces, we redistribute this power and reclaim the decision-making space and process itself.

Why are alternative political spaces vital?

Young and minoritised voices are often excluded and deprioritised in transnational conferences and convenings, where UN agencies and international NGOs tend to dominate. Creating alternatives helps to ***include the excluded and bridge movement and development spaces in a way that recognises unequal power distribution and actively seeks to change it.*** Lily Dong Li Rosengard from Community Care Collective reflects:

“It’s one element of redistributing power, when you create spaces for young people and marginalised groups to come together, to strategise, to talk about flexible funding or what they actually want to see in the world. It’s how big ideas can come together without big names like UN Women, UNICEF, Save, Plan drawing them out. Where everyone’s voice is equally valid”.

Dr Syeda Re'em Hussain from Nalafem Collective goes further:

“The current mainstream spaces which exist are designed to perpetuate hierarchies, to create exclusivity, to marginalise and to tokenise girls and young feminists within them. Alternative spaces are therefore not just alternatives but are counter spaces. For instance the reclamation of booths at Women Deliver and the deliberate effort of young feminists to partner with other young feminists. Creating this sisterhood was an act and practice of resistance to spaces that pit young feminists against each other and to compete for funding and recognition.”

Catherine Nyambura's reflections when describing how the ATHENA Network was created with an explicit convening goal also support this. The aim was *“to bridge the feminist agenda with global HIV spaces that are historically hierarchical and inaccessible, on research, and global policy.”* ATHENA does this through creating Young Women Networking Zones, a model they replicated at Women Deliver. *“Inviting people into your own space is less intimidating,”* and powerful in that feminist activists can reclaim the power to decide who comes into your space and on what terms. She shared:

“Our work is rooted in feminist movement building. One session [at Women Deliver] was a consultation for a new gender equality fund. To see the younger and older feminists come together on a collective advocacy agenda was exciting. We had space to bring together policy makers without being in their sanitised conference room.”

Everyone agreed that ***in the midst of the chaos, girls and young feminists need space to be themselves and to seek support.*** For many it is their first time at such a conference and there is an enormous pressure to show off your work. Lily Dong Li Rosengard recognised the importance of a space for girls, non-binary and gender non conforming youth and those more generally from the LGBTQIA+ community to rest and just be themselves:

“[They] need a space to converse with others so they don't always have to put on a brave face. You have a pressure when you meet adults that you have to always be selling yourself, and have a mask on and a front on and talk about how your organisation is flourishing. It can be so draining of energy and feel disingenuous.”

What can be most useful in young feminist -led or centred spaces is ***the opportunity to seek that support, allyship and friendship from those in a similar position and who hold similar politics and values.*** Laura Valenciano from RESURJ reflected on the Feminist Communities of Care (FemComs) that they were co-organised at the Commission on the Population and Development:

“FemComs made a big difference at CPD. It was my first time. It shifted my experience even from simply recognising the space of others - feeling accompanied. The unspoken parts of FemCom are the after-effects. Being able to share and listen and recognise ourselves in others. A few people attending had previous experience of CPD and could answer questions. It's not really questions that are available online, but simple day to day things like - 'what do I wear to this type of event?' It can be very calming to have these answers that you can't find elsewhere”.

Alternative political spaces can also be **opportunities to build capacity through peer learning as opposed to listening to more traditional panels**. Re'em from Nalafem Collective shares: *"It is also good to have practical sessions at these convenings. How to apply for funding in different ways, how to set up governance structures. There is a severe lack of workshops."* She argues that this tiring, and largely unproductive, format is challenging:

"The conference space needs to be reassessed for its intended purpose. Are young feminists being gathered to listen to panel after panel with no clear impact or outcome or can the purpose be to let young feminists lead?"

FEMCOMs have been convened by RESURJ along with DIVA for Equality in Fiji for several years. RESURJ co-ran FemComs at Women Deliver and at Purposeful's ACSHR in 2022. They are spaces of openness and accompaniment. As Laura notes, *"There is strength in recognising you are not the only one who is lost and accepting that vulnerability."* It also makes it **easier to engage meaningfully in the main forum space by building connections and friendship in advance**:

"Recently at the Latin America Safe Abortion Forum, Inroads held a space for members. It had a similar effect by creating a certain proximity between participants who had never met before but held similar values. We discussed the work we do in each of our local areas. It was easier to pass the ball to each other in broad conversation in the main spaces - oh we don't do that but our friends from Paraguay do. What starts in a safer smaller space, can be replicated in a later space."

For activists who are organising in restricted social and political contexts every day, convenings can also be a place for respite and rest and that in itself is political. Laura from RESURJ reflected on the importance of having your own space to literally pause and rest:

“Having a space designed by us and for us meant that we had a space to touch ground and rest up. We mention these things for others but it was also for ourselves. People would show up and ask if they just lay down here.”

Sofia and Perla, Mexican activists from Purposeful, who were the in-house wellbeing practitioners at ACSHR, reiterated the importance of wellbeing space, particularly when you are bringing together activists working on issues related to violence, many of whom are survivors:

“Healing spaces in international conferences are important because they are spaces of stillness in the midst of tension, stress, or chaos, especially after having had spaces of isolation due to the COVID pandemic, but also the simple fact that the activists who change the world can rest, is powerful and totally political.

When we address violence sessions in conferences, the participants or facilitators need support after sharing testimonies or contexts. Every day we attended to 30 to 50 activists, both in personal or group sessions, we gave psycho-educational and holistic healing information. This reflected that there is a great need for these care spaces with activists, especially when you go to a congress outside your country and

need everything from respite and rest, to finding a feminist healer. The reality is that traditional therapists or healers rarely have feminist approaches that understand what activists go through. That's why this space was very powerful and above all necessary, and in great demand."

While these spaces might be viewed by conferences organisers or funders as softer or less important, **everyone agreed that alternative political spaces are where the actual work happens.** They are critical for network building, shared strategising and agenda setting. For example, the Community Care Collective meet-ups provide space for cross-learning across thematics. Lily spoke of *"the importance of having history and knowledge about how strategies have and have not worked in the past. Young people don't have to invest in new strategies completely. We must carve out space at global conferences on strategy sharing."*

Catherine from the ATHENA Network reiterated this: *"Conveying sounds like such a light touch activity yet it is where agenda setting happens. Without it, you end up projectising."* Nana from RESURJ agreed on the importance of these spaces to deepen one's own political analysis: *"We are humble and we are equally curious. Curious about how newcomers and those who have come before see it. It's a strategy for us to be able to continuously read the landscape we are operating in with a fresh eye. A space to co-build our political analysis"*. In this way, **building connections actually becomes a way to strengthen movements:** *"Let's not just think of conferences as spaces to dump expertise and information, but as spaces to really build community and connect with others. Particularly those who only receive*

project funding and don't have much liberty over the fund they have. I see these spaces as movement building spaces."

The beauty is that they **provide space for collective action, while recognising the realities of those who seek them out**. Catherine from ATHENA describes the launching of a support network in Canada as an example where women could care for their children while being in community with others:

"Without the Women's Networking Zone, this would never have been launched. That is the collaboration of how to work together, to curate spaces that fully speak to you as feminists, to truly speak to your advocacy agenda while also providing space for breastfeeding".

Lastly, and importantly, we heard loud and clear that these spaces are **strategic places for gaining new support and resources**. Those with an exhibition or convening space at Women Deliver, sometimes gifted from partners or funders, mentioned the value of having physical space to invite donors to for tailored sessions and meetings: *"It would be attractive for a donor to know this. There are direct implications when putting your partners in a closer position to succeed or get their mission out there. I am not sure how much it cost them [to gift exhibition space] but I would consider it a good investment"*. This was a clear way that funders and better resourced organisations could support:

"For Women Deliver, one of our funders had access to a booth. It's a very expensive conference so typically young feminist organisations will not be able to afford a

booth. We put a call out for members to host sessions and ended up co-hosting 14 sessions in the booth.”

Catherine Nyambura, ATHENA Network

“We were able to have a booth because it was donated to us. It’s an easy way for donors to empower the organisations they are supporting beyond programmes and programmatic ideas they have for funding.”

Laura Valenciano, RESURJ

What challenges are young feminist facing when creating alternative space for social and political change?

To understand what makes informal spaces political, we need to understand what barriers exist in accessing formal spaces and in the creation of an alternative.

Everyone we spoke to mentioned **funding limitations** - not having money to get to a conference in the first place, not having enough to convene self-organised spaces (and so being beholden to the UN agency or INGO that “holds” the main space), not having resources to document learning, and, at conferences, not having upfront flexible funding to be able to book the ‘good’ slots and locations.

The labour that goes into organising and convening is often voluntary and unpaid:

“Typically we don’t have any funding or remuneration for our events or work we do as a collective. I feel bad because we have a lot of people doing a lot of work and we would like to fund them for what they’re doing, and it is also problematic to continue to perpetuate an environment where young people aren’t able to be paid for their work, because this is against our values”, says Lily at Community Care Collective.

It is a challenge shared by ATHENA Network: *“It’s a Catch 22 of how to do so much with little. People see you doing so much with so little and continue to under fund you. That is a challenge. One of our team members funded their own ticket and we couldn’t reimburse them.”*

Nana from RESURJ also spoke of the funding limitations: *“We keep going back to these conferences to build partnerships with young feminists but it’s becoming harder and harder to find funding for these spaces. Lots turns into hybrid modalities, which can be positive but it makes it harder to connect and follow up”.*

The work then suffers, because we know how critical these spaces are for collective strategising and advocacy. Decisions have to be made about what is most critical and activists are often working with restricted project funding. Catherine from the ATHENA Network reflected on how they didn't have **resources to document the impact** and wished they were able to document this with a photographer and a rapporteur to document insights from the sessions hosted at the booth. *“If we had unrestricted funding we could do this without worrying. Funders should fund convening grants or co-funding if they do convening themselves. You end up having to convene and service provision competing.”*

Another shared challenge was **timing** - not having enough in alternative spaces and having the timelines in formal spaces set by those with power. When young feminists were creating their own spaces, they felt that more time would be valuable to truly be

able to share space with as many as possible and, during sessions, be able to hear from everyone.

Lily from Community Care Collective reflected: *“It feels like we cut people off and we could have done with more time. We always need more time for these things so we can hear from everyone.”* At Women Deliver, ATHENA network offered exhibition space to partners to lead sessions. The demand was very high and they were not able to offer sessions to everyone. *“There was such demand for the sessions. I thought we would have three [sessions] a day and we had so much more.”*

Laura from RESURJ also found that time was a real challenge:

“Recently during FEMCOMs, we realised people want a pre, during and after session, which can be a lot. Sometimes there is simply no time. We all struggle with this. We face this difficulty when negotiations are taking place. You can plan around the conferences but really documents are negotiated way ahead. Even if we meet in person and share knowledge, you're coming to the party late.”

Young feminists are trying to create open and accessible space to strategise and connect, while also attempting to influence formal time-bound policy negotiations. Unlike the full-time, salaried staff from INGOs, who often have ECOSOC status and, thus, more ability to access and influence UN negotiations spaces, as well as more intel on the timeline process, young feminist activists are learning as they go, and are always attempting to keep the door open for others. In this way ***time is political*** - who sets, understands and has access to the timelines of how policy influencing

happens is a matter of power. This is not just the case in UN-led advocacy processes, but also at Women Deliver where the timeline to secure side events and exhibition space in the main programme, and at prime locations, is very much dependent on having the funds to do this early. Catherine from ATHENA Network shared her experience in trying to furnish her exhibition booth, which ended up being far away from the main area:

“Our booth was approved very late and delayed. We wanted to make it inviting so we assumed we could pull poofs from a collective space. We had our donor coming to meet us at the booth. As we sat down a lady came - a white lady - and she asked for me. She was very angry, stern and used strong language. She was almost saying you have not been exhibiting the proper decorum for this space and she ended up invoicing us for the additional furniture we had borrowed. Of course, we will not pay for it. It is interesting how other feminists show up. I doubt she would act that way to an older white woman. There was lots of policing of where we were standing in the space that we took up. It was about exercising power and reminding us of our place, which was a contradiction for a conference whose headline theme is spaces and solidarity.”

In this way, **space too is political and how it is occupied or shared is related to power and privilege**. Several young feminist-led groups and organisations we spoke with had similar experiences. They paid for side events and were given the worst time- slots or put in a hotel far away from the main venue because they were only able to confirm their funding late. This is also a safety issue with young people having to travel at night, often without the formal shuttle service. This **first-come-**

first-served approach is discriminatory as it privileges paid sponsors and partners and disadvantages small, grassroots, often young activists who were scrambling for travel grants and conveying funding literally up until days before.

Language justice is another, ongoing barrier to meaningful and inclusive engagement of young people in conferences and convening spaces. Purposeful decided to hire a French interpreter for the Girls' Resistance Space at Women Deliver when we realised it would not be possible to hold informal space for girls and young feminists in Rwanda without it. The cost quoted by Women Deliver/Planet Swiss seemed incredibly high (approximately \$1900 per 90 minute session), so we found a young feminist interpreter through our own connections in Rwanda. We tried to also secure ISL interpretation, but were unable to.

Laura from RESURJ also spoke of the importance of language justice:

“Language justice is another challenge in regards to spaces that are sort of accommodating to different languages but not really, or having problems with translation or being able to access documents in a prompt manner. There is only so much we can do, hiring interpreters and stepping in if we are bilingual. It feels like swimming against a current”.

While regional and global fora remain largely Anglophone, they will continue to reinforce colonial structures of power. Young activists cannot be relied on to step in and take on the burden of interpretation, when they already assume the burden of constant unpaid labour.

What practical elements make the creation and holding of a space political?

So what makes an alternative, political space beautiful and unique? What sets it aside from the conferences and convenings we might be familiar with? Speaking with those well practised in holding space, but also participating in such spaces as young feminists, and reflecting on our own experience at Purposeful, there are clear elements to building a space that is political and inclusive.

They are co-created and participatory in how they are designed. When we convened the Girls' Resistance Space at Women Deliver, we invited partners and collaborators to host sessions on everything from activism campaigning against FGM, to self-care and wellbeing strategies, to collective advocacy on girls' organising in crisis settings. Purposeful was able to intentionally step back and invite others to step in.

Catherine from ATHENA reflects on the power of the co-creation process itself:

“In sitting together we co-create them, safeguarding what are critical feminist gains from years past. One of the roles of putting together the networking zone is that you need to work with local groups, put together a steering committee etc. They may not have the resources to do that if these spaces were not there. That is a huge opportunity to open up spaces for diverse young feminist groups. It's such a joy as you feel like your work means something.”

Through their creation, young feminists are compensated for their time. Of their experience in hosting Nalafem Collective Summits, Re'em also reflected on the problem of unpaid labour:

“Co-creation with young feminists needs to be more than just input on programs. It needs to extend to who is invited, the design and outcome of the spaces as well. Additionally, free consultation in these spaces needs to stop. Young feminists need to be paid for their contributions as experts.”

All we spoke to recognised the need for these spaces to be resourced, not just to pay for exhibition space and conference passes, but to actually pay for the time of those who are creating and holding space.

They centre joy and creativity, recognising play as intensely political. Lily from Community Care Collective reflected on how:

“the personal is political. Talking about joy and care, you can say those two prompts and people can talk for hours. Doing creative things is important, having sessions to talk about issues, but doing something tactile e.g. sign making, using beads, collaging, colouring. The conversation gets much richer and you can start by asking, ‘what are you beading?’ This is what we did with the mural painting and the creative writing session to prioritise joy at Women Deliver.”

Nana from RESURJ also shared her experience from ACSHR:

“I attended the last two ACSHR conferences and I saw the difference. The Purposeful hosted conference in 2022, felt like a feminist space. There was food and music everywhere. People were chilled. People weren't in formal suits. The marker would be any space that feels like you can be yourself. You don't have to be too formal or take yourself too seriously. You can laugh and listen to music and dance. It feels homey.”

The importance of play-based methodologies was reiterated by Laura from RESURJ:

“In terms of methodology we wanted to make it as enjoyable as possible. We provide Lego and playdoh. Things for people to have in their hands to have sensorial enjoyment when we are discussing how we organise as young feminists. Curating a space to be enjoyable might seem silly, but it's very political.”

They are havens of rest and respite. This includes investing in experienced wellbeing practitioners and building in embodied care practices. As shared by Sofia and Perla from Purposeful:

“It is important that this type of conferences provide spaces for the activists, even if only in sessions with limited time, to have care and healing spaces that include containment, listening, self-massage, collective massage or providing natural remedies. In doing this, we help to make their walk outside lighter.”

This is particularly important for youth activists who are often showing up already exhausted. Laura from RESURJ also notes the importance of building in time for rest each day of a conference or conveying, something which is often overlooked in favour of having a fully packed agenda:

“We need to make sure spaces are not draining to the point where they don't want to return. It is important to create a positive experience for those who are there. Rest has to be incorporated in our day to day somehow and there is a lot of value in that. We need wellbeing and resting space in the midst of the chaos.”

They challenge traditional spaces and more formal ways to come together. We are so used to panels, and being spoken at by the ‘experts’, but we are seeing that convenings do not have to be this way. Lily from Community Care Collective recalls their first meet-up:

“It was in the park opposite the UN. The UN building is so gloomy and we need to get out of there because in there we feel constrained in our ideas and what we can say and what's appropriate. You feel you need to abide by standards. Nature is so healing and it was good to get fresh air.”

Designing an alternative space with intention also challenges the concept of expertise and who holds this power to impact knowledge. Nana from RESURJ reflects on this intention in creating FemComs spaces:

“It has also been a space to be humble. It’s intentional in the setup and how you design them. We co-create space with allies at conferences and UN convenings, coming to the space knowing it will not be a panel. We are not there to showcase a piece of work, not claiming to be harbouring certain expertise, which might be intimidating to a young feminist coming into that space.”

Case Study: MADRE’s Intergenerational Approach to Advocacy

MADRE is an international human rights organisation and feminist funder. MADRE strategically integrates legal, communications, and advocacy expertise as an international human rights organization while facilitating connections with policymakers, governments, and international players. They work to make local to international law relevant and accountable to the people it is meant to serve.

This case study explores their intergenerational approach to grassroots advocacy and solidarity, drawing from lessons learned from their work with Indigenous groups and organisations. While it is not specifically about creating alternative political spaces at conferences, it explores the process of intentional support and solidarity between generations. This case study was developed through conversation with Igdalia Rojas, Madre’s Programme Officer on Capacity Bridging.

The Evolution of MADRE’s Advocacy with Girls

Since its inception, MADRE has allied with women activists and organizations to support women and girl-led advocacy, exchanges, and movement-building at local, regional, and international levels.. This includes supporting grantee partners to

undertake advocacy in the international space, connected to the national and community level organising. The main focuses have been the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and the Conference of the Parties (COP). For many years, the focus was on supporting Indigenous women-led partners. MADRE started working with girls five years ago. Many of their long-term partners were starting to work more intentionally with girls at the community level. Through the VIVA Girl Grants, they were able to provide some funding to support that work. Learning from this, MADRE also wanted to be more intentional in engaging girls in advocacy.

Recently the Indigenous movement had a huge victory passing General Recommendation 39 on Indigenous Girls and Women³ with the CEDAW Committee, which recognised their collective rights and the *“inextricable link to their peoples, lands, territories, natural resources and culture”*. This was the result of years of work. Girls were a key part of the process, articulating their distinct needs and priorities, which are often lost under women’s or children’s rights.

MADRE engaged girls from the beginning, starting with training at the community level around what CEDAW was and why they were working on it. As a result, many girls and young people were interested in participating in the process, including through regional consultations. Where previously there was space for one woman, they pushed for there to be two spaces for a woman and a girl. Partners also began to autonomously support girls to engage in advocacy spaces. To further deepen their

³ Read more on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights website: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no39-2022-rights-indigeneous>

work, MADRE held intergenerational dialogues with partners around what it means to strengthen intergenerational spaces and advocacy efforts.

What does an intergenerational approach look like in practice?

A first important step is to understand what support is needed and be ready to provide tailored accompaniment: *“Identifying where you will need to show up so that folks feel supported and understanding who might need more support whether that’s logistically or in preparing for their advocacy agenda”*. This often needs to happen well before the actual trip: *“There’s so much prepping that goes into all of these spaces. We need to send our partner materials for CSW in January or in December, ideally, because a lot of the advocacy for CSW actually happens beforehand”*.

Accompaniment can also mean supporting partners, young and old, to navigate the mechanisms and the space, including understanding how to connect with decision-makers like member state representatives: *“If you don’t know what they are or don’t know how to navigate that, then you are not going to be able to be part of them.”*

Disability justice is another priority area for MADRE and they also work closely with disability rights partners and activists who face challenges accessing advocacy spaces and events. It is vital to be prepared from a staff resourcing perspective. It cannot be denied that engaging anyone meaningfully in international advocacy spaces is a heavy logistical lift, whether they are adolescent girls facing heightened safeguarding risks, a disability rights activist with access needs or adult partners who have never left their communities before and so have never booked a flight, or

checked into a New York hotel. Ahead of conferences and advocacy moments, approximately 50% of time was spent only on logistics.

In terms of preparation, MADRE holds online and in-person orientations to share intel on the advocacy process, walk through the agendas of negotiations or to support partners to prepare talking points for their own advocacy. These preparation sessions are also often held by Indigenous groups and form a space for knowledge sharing and collective strategizing. For example, older, more experienced Indigenous activists supporting girls to prepare their advocacy points, being approachable and giving feedback in a way that is constructive and respectful.

These preparation spaces are also a way to learn about inter-movement politics which can be tricky to navigate as a girl or young person:

“It’s the little things like politics within movements that young people have to navigate. It’s super helpful for everyone because they rely on each other. I feel like our partners are very close to each other as a result of being in orientation spaces together. When someone is new they’ll show them around, they will be their support, even when they don’t speak the same language. We have a partner from Nepal. She’s so beautiful that when we bring partners from other places that are newer and don’t speak Nepalese or English, she’ll still find a way to include them and communicate with them.”

Informal spaces for relationship building are also vital. During a partner trip to Geneva, staff and partners took advantage of the summer weather and organised lunch together and boat trips, so that everyone could get to know each other:

“I feel like those spaces are so rich too, when we bring partners together, because that relationship building and those connections when women and girls come together, it's where they really get to know each other as like in a human level and not so much in the workspace”.

Connections last long past a conference or event has happened:

“Often we see partners who are friends on Facebook and they're talking to each other or pinning each other when they're talking about specific issues that are happening in their community. So it also helps them strengthen their own work and practices that they take back home. For example, if they hear that a partner is doing something, they'll think - Oh, that could work in my own community. Can you tell me more? And they'll work together. This includes sharing learning on their work with girls”.

Policy wins are important, but what when partners come together, across generations and communities, collectivising around shared issues, that is huge.

Chapter 2: From Travel Grants to Holistic Accompaniment: Putting principles of safety, solidarity, inclusion and co-ownership into practice

In the first chapter, we heard how regional and global transnational advocacy and convening spaces, including conferences, events, and UN process-related moments, can be powerful places for girls and young activists. Purposeful is relatively new to bringing girls and young people to global transnational spaces and advocacy processes. We are learning and reflecting on our duty of care as a funder e.g. should we provide travel grants or do girls and young feminists require more intentional support and accompaniment? Our definition of accompaniment here stems from how we define our accompaniment to grantee partners. For us, *“to accompany is to show up, to go along with each other on a journey to achieve a collective goal/purpose. It means to be rooted in our individual and collective needs, experiences, and to provide relevant and reciprocal support.”*⁴ The provision of accompaniment is also a relationship-building process itself, rooted in solidarity and mutual respect.

In this chapter, we reflect on the challenges and downsides of regional and global transnational space and what funders and NGOs can do better to ensure girls and young feminist are engaged meaningfully, safely and respectfully. We share examples from our own experience of providing travel grants to grantees and holistic support to girls and young people as well as experiences and recommendations from

⁴ Global Resilience Fund (2022) ‘Accompaniment: the practice of solidarity, care, accountability, and trust’. Read more on the Global Resilience Fund website: <https://www.theglobalresiliencefund.org/accompaniment>

the practitioners, girls and young activists that we met with and hosted in the Girls' Resistance Space at Women Deliver, 2023.

The challenges and downsides of regional and global transnational advocacy spaces

While learning of the beauty and power of being able to connect with and build community with others, we also heard of the pain and exclusion felt by activists, with many feeling so hurt by their experience in regional and global transnational spaces that they are hesitant to attend again.

Spaces are overwhelming, where trauma is on show and can be performative and exhausting - multiple concurrent sessions, funder conversations, meeting new people, talking about their trauma daily. We witnessed activists exhausted, weary and in pain at Women Deliver, and we saw first-hand the lack of real support on offer to them. This is not unique to Women Deliver, and is evident in other global spaces. When activists spoke up about how they felt, they were told from fellow panellists that young people need to step up into leadership. The pressure is palpable - young people faced sickness, hotel mix-ups, flight cancellations and more, and their safeguarding contact was reachable only through email, with no person or team to speak with. We know staff and partners who experienced similar challenges, yet they are supported with hefty salaries, travel agents and with organisational support behind them. For those who have not travelled before, even though they might be 18 years old and no longer a minor, there is often no additional logistical support or pastoral care in advance or during, which is vital to making the process safe and inclusive.

“Women Deliver 2023 was a rollercoaster of activities, emotions, and unfulfilled expectations. This conference was a reflection of the white-washed, heteronormative spaces where queer Africans were unable to be themselves. It also felt like queer persons were not consulted or actively involved in the process. It is not enough to have restroom signs that are ‘inclusive’ of everyone, when the spaces within those rooms are exclusive. Women Deliver spaces were also tiring with too many activities shunted into too little time. Where is the room for rest and reflection in 7 a.m.-10 p.m. days? This space had zero regard for emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing.”

Youth activist

Young activists carry the burden of representation and continue to face tokenistic engagement. Girls and young people are often included merely for the sake of representation, rather than genuinely valuing their perspectives and expertise. They are invited to panels as the ‘youth voice’, or the ‘young disabled voice’, or the ‘adolescent voice’. Time and time again, we heard of girls and young activists invited to speak to represent an entire demographic when they joined panels or discussions. In one Women Deliver plenary, the youth activist on stage was described by the moderator as *“representing all the voices of young people around the world”*. This contrasts with other participants who are not burdened with representing their entire groups. The CEO of an INGO is not invited to represent all INGOs. A youth activist should never be expected to carry that burden.

“Tokenism is plaguing feminist movements and this obsession with representation politics will be our demise...It creates an illusion of inclusivity and a burden of having to represent your community.”

Arezoo Najibzadeh, Women Deliver Plenary Session

“People say to me - ‘It is so amazing that you are the voice of women with disabilities: - erm no, I am not the face of disabled women I am my own person.”

Young disability rights activist, Women Deliver Plenary Session

At Women Deliver, CSW and similar conferences, girls and diverse young activists are often completely absent from plenaries and high-level sessions. For those who followed Women Deliver as online participants, there were but a handful of adolescent girls seen on the main stage, and many youth seemed to be well into their late 20s and 30s. While there were brilliant youth-led concurrent sessions online and in person, those in Kigali were often at antisocial hours or in faraway hotels. One reason for this was due to resource constraints, several youth-led organisations were not able to confirm their participation until the fortnight before. A first-come, first-served policy for session slots favours larger organisations with money and political leverage, and disadvantages global majority/global south, grassroots, and youth-led groups. Despite knowing the challenges these spaces posed, efforts were not made to improve the experiences of marginalised individuals who reported feeling disenfranchised, exhausted, and disillusioned.

“Three days of navigating a capitalist-driven agenda disguised as development and equality engagement spaces. This space is not new to me, and it was more than disappointing to experience the worst of it at the first Africa-hosted event. Most of us came here cringing and hoping to take advantage of this space due to its convening power that is unmatched because of the people injecting funds to fuel their interests.

However, even with our knowledge of the platform and its challenges, it was saddening to see that no efforts were made to improve the experiences of our peers and friends, who are often disenfranchised. All points of our discourse, narratives, and experiences were mentioned with blatant lip service. It's exhausting."

Youth activist, Women Deliver

Generally, regional and global transnational spaces are neither inclusive nor safe. Disabled and gender diverse young activists at Women Deliver faced significant issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and disrespect. There was a clear lack of consideration for their needs and identities - something also experienced by Purposeful's own staff members. For example, an activist with visual impairment struggled to navigate the conference without appropriate support, with hours left waiting alone for guidance, and a wheelchair user experienced significant delays in obtaining a wheelchair. We heard repeatedly, loud and clear the feelings of disappointment, sadness, and rage. Young activists hoped for a safe and inclusive space, but their expectations were not met. Lack of access to mobility aids and support services created significant barriers for disabled attendees. This is something we have seen also at CSW, and a challenge we struggled to overcome as ACSHR organisers ourselves. We share lessons for how we could have done better on creating an inclusive space in our conference report, found in [this PDF document](#) on the ACSHR website.

"Initially, two people were planning to travel. One was me, a person with visual impairment, and another was the sighted member of the organisation. As another

person's early visa request was denied, she could not travel. So, I had to travel and manage on my own and it was a bit challenging in the first few days.”

Youth activist, CSW

Patriarchal and ableist norms were perpetuated in how the conference was organised and delivered. The experiences of youth activists are shared in their letters to Women Deliver in the following chapter. There is a need for an apology and for accountability. Addressing these issues requires more than just empty gestures and necessitates real efforts to create an inclusive environment.

Chapter 3: Dear Women Deliver: Letters from Youth Activists

This chapter is a collection of letters and notes from activists who visited the Girls' Resistance Space hosted by Purposeful during Women Deliver, 2023. These were collated in collaboration with CHEVS - a youth-led organisation dedicated to the advancement of the rights and welfare of communities of young LGBTQIA+ persons and sex workers across West Africa.

Letter from Purposeful and CHEVS

Dear Women Deliver,

We are writing to share a collection of letters written by girl and youth activists at the Women Deliver conference in Kigali. We, Purposeful and CHEVS, decided to create

a writing space on the last day as so many youth activists were coming to us upset, angry, and in pain, and to seek support and solidarity.

Firstly, we appreciate that organising a conference of this size is a huge undertaking. We also know how important convenings are for social justice movements.

To be useful, however, these spaces must preserve and uphold the dignity and inclusivity of every identity that makes up those social justice and feminist movements. We are disappointed and angry that this was not the case. The language used by you to describe the conference as a feminist space is co-opting and misleading. It is dangerous because many youth activists were travelling for the first time and this was their first experience of a 'feminist' convening, yet they were excluded and felt let down.

There was not enough practical support to match the quantity of people you were welcoming. If you cannot manage to convene such a large group properly, focus on quality and a smaller conference.

We understand the importance of building partnership across sectors including with the government of nations but you must put yourself in check else you become complicit to image washing and platforming oppressors as seen in your actions over the years. In 2019, while Kenyan women protested femicide, Uhuru Kenyatta was invited to speak about this non-existing women's solidarity. This year while Senegalese citizens protested against brutality and authoritarianism of the government, Mack Sall was invited for what many feminists have called a feminist-

washing panel. The Hungarian president was also invited to spout pro-family rhetoric in a supposedly feminist space. You did not think about how their presence and platforming would affect women, young people and LGBTQIA+ participants whom you have promised to stand by, and indeed, this does not align with your claims on the website that “The Women Deliver Plenary Stage brought together the most powerful voices of the feminist community in all its diversity.”

We are writing in solidarity to uplift the voices of girls and young feminists, including from the LGBTQIA+ community, and from the disability community, whose expectations and high hopes were cut short as to what a feminist space should be and feel. We are speaking up on the amount of othering and ‘them’ing experienced in the space and calling for more true inclusive and intergenerational approaches.

We hope that going forward you are able to sincerely reflect on these recommendations and make changes. We hope next time we don’t see Women Deliver spending its time defending itself tokenistically in the media instead of focusing efforts on righting the wrongs and creating inclusive spaces. We hope more time and resources are spent on making sure youth activists are safely supported, by experienced people on the ground, not by faceless email addresses. We hope more youth scholarships go to girls and adolescents under 18, but only if you are able to support them meaningfully and safely.

We invite you to reflect on these letters as a team and with your board and to reflect on the consequences of these actions on the lives of young feminists. You have ingrained an unfortunate narrative in them, shifting how they see feminist convenings

from spaces of power and solidarity to those of pain and exclusion. This will have a long-term impact in their lives, leaving a mark for how they think feminist organising can be. There must be an acknowledgement of this and clear steps for how amends will be made.

Yours sincerely,

Purposeful and CHEVS

Letters from Youth Activists

Dear Women Deliver,

We gathered in July 2023, for the first time for most of us young people, to participate in what was supposed to be an inclusive convening of feminists from across the world. However, this was different for us. We believe in the power of lived experiences, so given below is a collection of experiences and reflections from our time at Women Deliver.

We are absolutely horrified at the lack of accessibility and respect for disabled women and gender-diverse folks at Women Deliver. We write these letters with heavy emotions; our disabled bodies are full of grief and rage. We don't need your apologies; we need accountability.

For many disabled and queer women, this conference marked the first time we've stepped foot, wheeled, or hopped into an international space. We come from

countries and families that are violent to our disabled gendered queer bodies and hoped this conference would be our feminist disabled utopia. Unfortunately, this conference has done nothing but perpetuate and replicate the patriarchy and ableism that we often seek refuge from.

Anonymous girl and youth activists who gathered at the Girls Space for a collective writing session.

Dear Women Deliver,

The moment I entered the Kigali Convention Centre, I waited 20 minutes for a wheelchair. I'm physically disabled, and not all of us carry our own wheelchairs or have the resources to buy an electric wheelchair to go around on our own.

I came alone to the conference, and why the fuck can't a disabled person go alone to places? Why are we always expected to have someone accompanying us? When they dropped me to my panel discussion, I had to give up the wheelchair because someone else would need it. I understand this, but my question is, why does a conference with 6,300 delegates and innumerable funders have only five wheelchairs?

I want answers from Women Deliver. My body feels disregarded and burdensome.

Anonymous, trans-disabled feminist, 25 years old

Dear Women Deliver,

We are considered a leftover of the movement as we are remembered as an afterthought. We want to ask the non-disabled feminists who attended Women Deliver when they have ever fought for us. When I got to the memorial, I didn't cry.

How do we move beyond basic agency and dignity that truly exist and enjoy in a space? One of the reasons why I am disappointed is that they seem to be aware of the issues, but we came here and saw that we were excluded from meaningful participation.

We can organise something together as a small collective. It's difficult to navigate a world without equal opportunities for people with disabilities. We can leverage the strength of our collective voice.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

Women Deliver 2023 was a rollercoaster of activities, emotions, and unfulfilled expectations.

This conference reflected the white-washed, heteronormative spaces where queer Africans could not be themselves. It also felt like queer persons were not consulted and actively involved in the process. Having restroom signs that are “inclusive” of everyone is not enough when the spaces within those rooms are exclusive. Women Deliver spaces have also been tiring as too many activities have been shunted into too little time. Where is the room for rest and reflection on 7 am - 10 pm days? This space had zero regard for emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Rwanda has been a beautiful experience as a country. It, however, made me a bit sad to learn that during the Women Deliver Conference, the lives of queer people were co-opted. *'Let them be for the week that they will be here; then things will be factory re-set when they are gone.'*

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

I am hugely against tokenising queer existence, and a lot of my queer experience felt as such. From bathrooms with trans and non-binary signage for optics to most sessions about queer politics being either very early in the morning or very late at night. I have experienced a lot of othering of queer people, especially those that use pronouns she/they having their tags printed "OTHER." Quite literally, due to poor handling of the safety of Women Deliver shared spaces, inviting homophobes to the space just because they are dignitaries was in bad taste.

Overall, I like feeling seen and intentionally planned for, and boy, did I long for that feeling. Despite it all, my hope is more of these spaces will continue to exist but also to learn how inclusion intentionally works and looks like.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

Inclusion is the key driver to gender equality. Women Deliver 2023 is shaping that and should/must meaningfully engage gender-diverse persons and have full representation of the most marginalised communities left behind in the programming of health, policies, and laws. Consider making the spaces more inclusive and accessible for LGBTQIA+ persons.

Gender equality calls for intentional advocacy and acknowledgement of diversities; it calls for allyship and collective efforts to create and re-imagine a more just world where folks are not scrutinised based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Women Deliver is the first step we should take to ensure inclusive and diverse interventions are made and tailored for everyone—human rights for all. Intentional advocacy. Accountability. Leadership.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

It felt like they invited LGBTQIA+ persons and young persons but did not really speak for us. What is the purpose of sending an email for accessibility when the venues did not provide for people with disabilities - even the shuttles?

The venue distance was horrible, and the shuttles took their sweet time. The recommended pick-up points were for the elites who could afford to stay in five-star accommodation. Many people were more interested in connecting with donors than communicating with participants.

The food was stale and not reflective of the diverse people. I enjoyed engaging with the diverse people here, but it felt more like a pre-packaged feminist event. For the cost of registration, it was poorly planned.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

Three days of navigating a capitalist-driven agenda disguised as development and equality engagement spaces. This space is not new to me, and it was more than disappointing to experience the worst of it at the first Africa-hosted event. Most of us came here cringing and hoping to take advantage of this space due to its unmatched convening power because of the people injecting funds to fuel their interests.

However, even with our knowledge of the platform and its challenges, it was saddening to see that no efforts were made to improve the experiences of our peers and friends, who are often disenfranchised. All points of our discourse, narratives, and experiences are mentioned with blatant lip service. It's exhausting.

I'm grateful for the colleagues and connections established. I'm thankful for the side chats that were placed in graveyard slots but fuelled more action and fire in our movements. I'm grateful for the comrades walking the journey. There just HAS to be an improvement in the coordination of this space - otherwise, we become part of the problem.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Women Deliver is not feminist. Registration fee is very high, which puts young feminists and activists in a place of power imbalance and denies them access. Hierarchy- it felt as though there was an 'othering'.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Because tokenism is just not it!

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

My experience in the Women Deliver Conference 2023 is that I enjoyed many sessions - the musical arts festival was so pleasurable. I met many different people from different countries, which was amazing. I also enjoyed different cultures from other countries, so that was amazing. I am thrilled I could be here as a young person. It is good to have this opportunity - I feel very honoured. At the conference, I liked that there is a Youth Zone and a wellbeing space! I appreciate a lot that Women Deliver took care of that. Everyone needs space to relax, so that was a really good thing.

I also feel honoured that I could lead a side event as a young delegate! Creating Spaces from Youth to Youth. But I felt quite disappointed that our event took place in a conference room in the basement of a hotel pretty far from UCC at 7 pm. Almost nobody came, and I think that was because there were not enough shuttles going there and from there back to the hotels, especially for young people whom we especially wanted to have our event for - it was, of course, dangerous, late at 9pm in the dark.

Therefore, only a few could come to this event. Meanwhile, youth should actually be the centre. And safety should be the highest priority! Not just at the Convention Centre but also at other hotels where young people stay. They should be close to the central place so young people can easily arrive. I was so glad and privileged that I was always with a chaperone.

My organisation cares a lot about security, so I was very safe. They arranged everything with the hotel and drove to the Convention Centre and hotels through Kigali. So, I thank my chaperones and Plan International (the organisation I was with) for caring about me. Still, Women Deliver should care for every young person when they are not at the conference with an organisation. Every young person has the right to be safe.

Young people have special needs and are vulnerable in a unique way, so there must not be any young person having to travel on their own or be at the conference on their own. They need someone with them. Youth must be the focus of the future Women Deliver conference and always be closest to the central place where they can always rest at their hotel and be home as much as possible to be as safe as possible!

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

Here are some of the things I faced at Women Deliver:

- Sexual harassment- Facing harassment from hotel and security staff and having no one to reach out to immediately; being told to email safeguarding.
- Not receiving the promised financial support.
- Embarrassment for having to ask for help from others.
- Irresponsible and uncomfortable Women Deliver staff when being held accountable
- Medical negligence - being overly sick, having no one to reach out to.
- Abusive security.
- Queerphobia was being excused - queer folks were told to “grow a thicker skin.”
- Lack of accessibility.
- WD staff telling disabled young leaders they should have “complained on requested accommodations” and to “stop the drama” and that “there wasn’t much they could do now.”
- No Youth Space!
- Speaking opportunities for much older people. Adolescents and adults aged 20-22 are not being seen or invited to the plenary, many sessions, etc.
- Tokenism.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Dear Women Deliver,

The conference was an intense experience that left me overwhelmed with emotions. There have been so many people I have met and shared brief conversations with who have expressed how draining the experience left them feeling. This drain has been traced to the following:

- Excluded by language, accessibility, and decision-making.
- Unsafe by the uncertainty around safety and security due to homophobia, transphobia, and the decision by organisers to include an anti-rights persons as part of the plenary during the opening event of the conference.
- Movement around the various locations and navigating spaces within the conference.
- Capitalistic space with political language and systems.

While the space has been filled with feminist solidarity and queer folks have been able to have conversations and find community, there is still more to be done to address the issues mentioned above. Persons with disabilities especially found it hard to navigate the spaces, and as much as there has been progress made regarding inclusion, much more needs to be done.

Anonymous Youth Activist

Recommendations to Conference Organisers and Funders

We must all do better. With convening and organising power, comes the responsibility to create space that is inclusive, meaningful, and accessible. As one youth activist in the Girls' Resistance Space reflected:

“Gender equality calls for intentional advocacy and acknowledgment of diversities; it calls for allyship and collective efforts to create and re-imagine a more just world where folks are not scrutinised based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

Below are a set of recommendations for funders, conference organisers and allies. These build on principles of accompaniment whereby accompaniment practices are guided by the needs of activists, a spirit of collaboration and mutual learning⁵.

Centre the wellbeing of activists and participants in transnational spaces and recognise the very real impact exclusion and harm can have on young people's mental health. This is not a nice-to-have.

- Make genuine efforts to create inclusive, respectful, and supportive environments for everyone involved. Invest in physical wellbeing spaces that are comfortable, inclusive and welcoming where participants can seek healing and support. Fund young activist-led ideas for how these should be held and created.
- Build wellbeing sessions into the programme to facilitate trauma-informed conversations and collective action on why wellbeing and care is a political

⁵ Global Resilience Fund (2022) 'Accompaniment: the practice of solidarity, care, accountability, and trust'. Read more on the Global Resilience Fund website: <https://www.theglobalresiliencefund.org/accompaniment>

strategy and what role movements, governments, funders and broader civil society have in supporting.

- Hire wellbeing practitioners and trained therapists to provide individual or small group support, particularly for survivors.
- Create space for survivor-led spaces in the run up to ensure they are informing the dialogue.
- Where mistakes have been made, there must be apology and accountability.

“Investing in spaces for youth and wellbeing and making sure that people don’t burn out so fast and so young is in service of all of our missions. We must take care of each other.”

Laura Valenciano, RESURJ

Resource the meaningful participation, co-leadership, and co-ownership of girls and young activists in regional and global transnational advocacy and convening spaces.

- Taking inspiration from the Young Feminist Manifesto⁶ and new research on Generation Equality resourcing⁷, this should be directed to girl and youth activists themselves, and their groups and collectives as opposed to adult-led INGOs and multilateral agencies.
- While formal spaces remain exclusive and largely unfeminist in practice, also fund self-led alternative spaces.
- Funding should cover girl and youth-led activities as well as logistics, visas,

⁶ Read the Young Feminist Manifesto (2021) on their website:

<https://gefyoungmanifesto.wixsite.com/website>

⁷ Generation Equality - The Time is Now to Re-distribute Power and Resources to Girls and Young Feminists. Read more in [this PDF report on the Purposeful website](#).

travel expenses, health insurance (particularly if they are travelling to the US), and any accessibility related costs and costs to cover childcare.

- Provide flexible travel and convening grants, not just for existing partners. Recognise the importance in advance, and don't wait for activists to have to beg at the last minute for resources.

Depending on the experience of the girl and youth activists travelling, offer travel grants and/or more holistic accompaniment and support.

- Travel grants alone are usually not enough. Even if a young person has travelled internationally before, as a funder or NGO, you have a duty of care and should offer different types of accompaniment.
- Take time to speak with each young person or group to understand their unique reality, experience, and expectations. Be very clear up front about what support you can and cannot offer.
- Even if you are providing a travel grant and minimal accompaniment, you should still be prepared to dedicate a percentage of staff time for last-minute issues that arise e.g. a missed flight or a security incident at the hotel.

Remember that if a staff member travels and faces a problem, they likely have a team at home and a travel agent's emergency number to support them.

- For those who have not travelled before or face heightened risks e.g. due to the political context they are coming from, the issues they advocate on or the identities they hold, be prepared to provide more holistic support before, during, and after. If you are not equipped to provide this directly, fund NGOs and girl/youth funders who are.

If you are unsure about how to support the convening of alternative political spaces, ask!

- Ask girls and young feminists if they want flexible funding, physical space, travel grants, funding to design practical capacity building sessions, time to host sessions in an existing space etc.
- Ask too, whether and how they wish you and other decision-makers to be present or whether they would prefer you to step back.
- Share physical space with girl and young feminist groups. Gift or share exhibition space and pay for side event venues, where possible taking on the administrative burden of contracting these spaces.

“They should ask girls what they prefer. This might be anonymously so girls can share what they really need, and also so they can advise on whether and how decision-makers should be involved. You need to talk about it with the groups you work with. For girls who haven’t been in those spaces before - connect them with girls/youth who have so they can learn from others experiences.”

Lily Dong Li Rosengard, Community Care Collective

Provide per-diems in advance!

- Do not make assumptions about what girls and young people can cover in advance of a trip. Speak with them about what works best for them.
- If paying after the event, obtain bank or payment details in advance (PayPal and Western Union might also be options) so that payment is swift and not delayed. Work with your Finance team so they are aware the payment will need to be made.

- Add a buffer to cover emergency costs.

Engage in and support transnational spaces with a critical eye, especially those that are organised by global north organisations.

- Call out co-option of movement language when you see it. Follow the money - are resources genuinely moving to the movements being spoken about? Who is part of or excluded from the discussion?
- Don't validate spaces or processes that lift up business-as-usual actors or reinforce anti-rights rhetoric.

Create intentional, facilitated relational learning spaces where folks can find the similarities between their stories and experiences.

- Provide space or resource self-led spaces to encourage activists to find ways of bridging the feminist, disability and queer movements, as their issues are so connected.
- Explicitly offer space for self-organising, accompanied by resources, as well as offering opportunities for bringing ideas, feedback and new learnings into the wider conference.

Centre disability and queer justice in how spaces are convened and where you move resources.

- Read the letters in this report from young disabled and queer activists that attended Women Deliver. Reflect on how you or your organisation have directly or indirectly reinforced experiences of exclusion. What might you do differently next time?

- Consult with LGBTQIA+ and disability activists in advance. Understand their needs and realities e.g. heightened risks when travelling through customs or on return to their communities and the additional support and resources they might need.
- Create conditions for safety through safeguarding policies and processes that are clear and known by all, through the physical space (for example, step free spaces, clear venue map, gender neutral and accessible toilets), and through training facilitators and speakers to be inclusive in their contributions.
- Only by actively engaging with disabled, young and queer folks from the beginning, paying for their expertise and time, can conference organisers begin to uphold inclusivity, respect and accessibility, not just in principle but in practice too.

If you have access to advocacy spaces nationally and internationally, open doors for girls and youth activists and support with follow up at the national level.

- For those with ECOSOC status at the UN, share your passes with girl and youth activists so they can access the negotiation spaces.
- For those with contacts in government and with policy-makers at the national level, support with connections after international commitments are made e.g. helping to set up a meeting between girls/young activists to follow up on commitments and hold governments to account - this might include making introductions, holding intergenerational dialogues or providing flexible advocacy related advocacy grants to girl and youth groups.

Listen to girl and youth partners and advisors to understand the spaces and processes they wish to be a part of.

- Groups may wish to participate in global policy processes such as the Commission on the Status of Women, global conferences such as Women Deliver, regional feminist spaces like Encuentro Feminista in Latin America or philanthropic spaces like the Human Rights Funders Network or Black Feminist Fund convening.
- Consider having travel grants available on a rolling basis that are quick and easy to access in case last-minute opportunities arise.

Organise three-six months in advance where possible, so that those who have never travelled before, have time to organise a passport and visa.

- Too often, the same girls and young people are brought as individuals because they have travelled already and can travel with little notice. This risks reinforcing inequalities.
- For those you invite who have a disability, they will need to travel with aids for disability support and will need to obtain additional passports and visas e.g. visual aids travelling with visually impaired people. Back-up plans should be developed in instances where the young person is granted a visa but their aid is not e.g. having a dedicated staff member to accompany them each day.

Useful Resources

PDF document on the CIVICUS website: [‘Maximising Benefits: A Recommended Framework for Volunteerism and Compensation for Young people’](#)

Article on the Global Resilience Fund website: 'Accompaniment: the practice of solidarity, care, accountability, and trust':

<https://www.theglobalresiliencefund.org/accompaniment>

PDF document on the ACSHR website: Purposeful (2022) African Conference on Sexual Health and Rights Main Conference Report: <https://acshr2022.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ACSHR-Report.pdf>

PDF document by Purposeful (2022) on the ACSHR website: LGBTQIA+ Rights on the African Continent including Lessons for Organising Future Events: <https://acshr2022.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/LGBTQIA-Rights.pdf>

Article on the We Trust You(th) website (2023): 'Best practices in supporting young people to attend conferences':

<https://www.wetrustyouth.org/post/best-practices-in-supporting-young-people-to-attend-conferences>

Article and PDF manifesto document on the Young Feminist Manifesto website (2021): <https://gefyouthmanifesto.wixsite.com/website>

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Purposeful Team

Georgia Booth

Rosa Bransky

Erin Barnes

Contributors

Anita Graham, CHEVS

Aya Chebbi, Nala Feminist Collective

Catherine Nyambura, ATHENA Network

Igdalia Rojas, MADRE

Justin Chidozie Chukwukere, CHEVS

Laura Valenciano, RESURJ

Lily Dong Li Rosengard, Community Care Collective

Nana Abuelsoud, RESURJ

Dr Syeda Re'em Hussain, Nala Feminist Collective

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Photography

Hickmatu Leigh

Purposeful Sierra Leone

2 Lewis Drive, Hill Station, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Purposeful UK

Studio 3a, Blue House Yard, 5 River Park Road, London N22 7TB

www.wearepurposeful.org