

Expert Group Meeting

Sixty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 69)

‘Beijing +30: Emerging issues and future directions for gender equality and women’s rights’

Virtual, 13–15 August 2024

Redefining, Reimagining and Rebuilding Multilateralism: Young Feminist Visions

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN-Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

1. Global political context

The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 solidified the Beijing Platform for Action, a transformative achievement that set in stone a global blueprint for gender equality. Its legacy has been profound, driving legal reforms, amplifying women's and girls' voices, and fostering movements for justice worldwide. However, the current mobilizations for Beijing +30 needs to confront the stark crises we are witnessing: the genocide in Palestine, conflicts raging in Sudan and the Congo, and the devastating reality of gender apartheid in Afghanistan and Iran. Under occupation, settler colonialism, and authoritarian regimes, gender equality remains unattainable.

In addition to political conflicts, the world is grappling with the escalating climate crisis, which has brought unprecedented loss and damage. This global challenge not only threatens ecosystems and livelihoods but also widens existing gender inequalities. Women and girls, especially in the Global South, bear the brunt of climate change's impacts, facing disproportionate vulnerability to displacement, food insecurity, and loss of economic opportunities. Climate change deepens the structural inequalities that feminist movements have long fought against, making the pursuit of gender justice inseparable from the fight for climate justice.

It is within this fraught global context that feminist movements, young women, girls, adolescents and young people in all their diversity, are once again coming together—navigating the red tape, pushing forward against resistance, and rebuilding trust in multilateral processes. As youth, in all our diversity, we are fostering difficult but necessary conversations, driving accountability, and challenging current structures, systems, and practices, re-shaping them based on decolonial, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-classist, intergenerational, and feminist frameworks of equity, inclusion, access, co-creation, co-ownership, and co-leadership. At the heart of this new wave of revolution and revitalisation are young feminists – leading the charge, determined to forge a future rooted in justice, rights, and transformative change.

2. Feminist multilateralism

There is an urgent need for us to rebuild and re-imagine current systems of multilateralism. The existing social contract is governed by patriarchal and imperialistic principles, with gender stereotypes and harmful social norms deeply embedded in our socio-economic and political fabrics over centuries. We must collectively accelerate progress towards a feminist reality of multilateralism – an approach to global governance that centres feminist principles across decision-making processes and structures of international cooperation. This means challenging the traditional power dynamics and hierarchies that have historically marginalized women, girls, and gender-diverse groups in multilateral spaces such as the United Nations, international, regional and sub-regional organizations, international financial institutions, and global negotiations. In essence, feminist multilateralism reimagines global governance through the lens of equity, care, justice, and rights, aiming for systemic transformation rather than mere 'surface level' reform.

This needs to begin by addressing the several new methodologies through which there is a growing corporate capture of the UN and multilateralism, such as the recognition of corporate powers as equal stakeholders under the “multistakeholder approach”, which has weakened accountability of private capital and watered down laws and processes ensuring human rights and social justice. In the past years, we have witnessed multilateral spaces, including the Commission on the Status of Women, Conference of Parties to the Rio Conventions, and UN programmes, agencies, and funds, including UN-Women, increasingly captured by corporate power. Large private sector groups with accumulation of resources and power, in several ways continue to influence and lobby decisions, blocking progress on issues such as climate change, financing, biodiversity loss, food and water security, human rights, and gender equality as a cross-cutting issue. While civil society, feminist, and young people have been historically excluded and shut out of decision-making processes, the seats at the table for corporate powers have been expanding with increasing comfort.

Another area of concern in the current multilateral domain are the shrinking civic spaces coupled with the severe lack of assurance and systemic failures to protect the rights of and safeguard frontline socio-environmental and human rights defenders, activists and feminists, land defenders and Indigenous peoples who carry the burden of advocating for rights and justice. This undermines global efforts for sustainable development, gender equality, and environmental protection. 85% of the world’s population lives in nations where civic space is categorized as obstructed, repressed, or closed.¹ In 2023, the alarming trend of violence against socio-environmental and human rights defenders, activists, and Indigenous peoples continued, with 196 environmental defenders killed globally.² The conversations on holistic safety and security for activists and defenders while engaging in multilateral spaces are often ignored, leaving them more vulnerable. The exhaustion and trauma they carry while engaging in these processes is not adequately recognized.

Additionally, there is a serious resourcing gap in the advocacy and work carried out to advance gender equality, especially by young women, girls, and youth in all their diversity. Gender equality funding makes up just 1% of ODA. Meanwhile, the anti-rights and anti-gender movements are increasingly well-funded and resourced. We must centre feminist financing at Beijing +30 and across other multilateral spaces that are making decisions on such matters, including at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD), prioritizing the most impacted and marginalized women, girls, and gender-diverse people. In 2023, global military expenditure reached a record high of \$2.443 trillion, marking a 6.8% increase from the previous year.³ While military budgets grow, critical social issues, like gender equality, social protection, sexual and reproductive health and rights, care work, the safeguarding of environmental and social

¹ “Facts.” *Civicus Monitor*, 16 March 2023, <https://monitor.civicus.org/facts/>.

² “The violent erasure of land and environmental defenders.” *Global Witness*, 9 September 2024, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/missing-voices/>.

³ “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023.” *SIPRI*, 22 April 2024, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf.

defenders, as well as support for feminist movements and collectives, remain underfunded or neglected. Moreover, as the UN contends with a liquidity crisis, funding across programs on gender equality has stalled. Thus, this points to the contrast between massive military investment and a severe lack of sufficient, accessible, flexible, and sustainable funding for initiatives to address climate change or to support those on the frontlines of socio-environmental justice.

Feminist visions of multilateralism also seek to revisit the current frameworks for the accountability and transparency of governance mechanisms. Such frameworks must ensure that the most marginalized communities, especially women, girls, Indigenous peoples, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, are not only included but co-leading across decision-making processes. This requires transparent structures for participation and leadership, power-sharing, and the co-creation of global policies that impact these groups.

3. Impact of multi-stakeholderism: Lessons through Generation Equality Forum

Rooted in the principles of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) serves as a multi-generational, intersectional movement aimed at tackling the most urgent challenges facing women and girls worldwide. Multi-stakeholderism at the GEF emphasizes inclusivity, ensuring that the voices of those most affected by gender inequalities particularly young women, grassroots feminists, and marginalized communities are at the forefront of global decision-making processes. As we redesign more feminist and democratized multilateral systems and structures, it is important to draw from the best practices and transformational progresses set by the GEF, its six Action Coalitions, and the work led by civil society groups, feminist organizations and collectives, and youth organizations and movements in advancing the Global Acceleration Plan.

4. Recommendations

Based on the Young Feminist Manifesto:⁴

- (a) Ensuring the systematic integration and institutionalization of meaningful youth engagement and leadership, especially of young women, girls, and adolescents, in all their diversity, centring young people facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, marginalization, and violence, across decision-making, policy-making, and the United Nations system, at all levels, including in intergovernmental bodies, processes, and delegations, by intentionally shifting power dynamics and adopting co-creational and co-ownership methods of work, while ensuring a safe and enabling environment for them

⁴ “Young Feminist Manifesto, A Bold And Transformative Vision For Change.” 17 March 2021, https://e303bb68-0f86-4625-b0df-382bc663b63a.filesusr.com/ugd/13b9c9_9205e426df3a4a849fcbe0166e74548f.pdf.

and taking action to eliminate all barriers, and in this regard, reaffirm the commitment to listen to and work with youth;

- (b) Democratize and transform multilateralism, identify and agree on integrating feminist approaches and principles into multilateral institutions and processes;
- (c) Confront the increase of corporate capture of UN funding and processes, implement transparent and mandatory public disclosure of all private sector contributions, including the amount, source, and purpose of funding. Additionally, review corporate involvement across UN processes, inducing intergovernmental processes, ensuring that all participating private sector entities can demonstrate full adherence to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, with strict criteria on environmental sustainability and human rights compliance as preconditions for engagement.
- (d) Guaranteeing the full respect of all the human rights and fundamental freedoms of human rights, environment and climate defenders, especially women, girls, and young defenders, in all their diversity, ensuring that legislation is not misused to target them, countering impunity and ‘red-tagging’ to provide safety and protection, and repealing all laws that allow for detention without trial, restrict fundamental freedoms, and the criminalization of peaceful association, and reaffirm the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;
- (e) Calling for the independent review of the UN system on gender equality and committing to implement its recommendations to strengthen the work of the UN in a gender-transformative manner and to support with the acceleration of implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action;
- (f) Establish enhanced transparency frameworks and accountability mechanisms across UN systems, such as but not limited to, through specific indicators targeted towards civil society and youth access and engagement, strengthened communication and information sharing, and transparency over financial flows and budgeting;
- (g) Increasing multi-year, core, sustainable, accessible, and flexible gender-transformative funding directed towards capacity-building programs for young people and youth-led and girl-led organizations, networks, movements, and collectives, as well as supporting the establishment of dedicated funding mechanisms to sponsor the participation of young people working at the grassroots level, especially of young women, girls, and adolescents in Global South regions, across United Nations processes; recognizing that philanthropy and giving exist because of inequality, and colonial capitalist dynamics, and that feminist financing can dismantle the traditional hierarchical giving;
- (h) Welcome the Generation Equality Forum, convened by UN-Women and co-chaired by France and Mexico, in partnership with civil society, youth, and adolescents, and in this regard, welcome the Generation Equality Forum’s 5-year action journey to implement all the agreed actions across the Global Acceleration Plan by UN-Women and Generation Equality Multi-Stakeholder Partners, encouraging all stakeholders, inter alia, Member

States, UN agencies, programmes, and funds, civil society, youth, academia, media, and the private sector to become Commitment Makers to the Action Coalitions and Compact so that people and the planet can continue to reap the benefits of Generation Equality and its multi-stakeholder models of co-creation, partnership, implementation, and accountability.