

young feminist caucus

youth coalition 

**THE POWER
WE BUILT:**

A conversation on
**FIVE YEARS OF
YOUNG FEMINIST
LEADERSHIP &
ORGANISING**

INTRODUCTION

On July 1, 2026, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) culmination event was convened in Nairobi by UN Women, the Government of Kenya, and other GEF stakeholders. This was a reflective moment on achievements, lessons learned, and the future of feminist multistakeholder action for gender equality for this concluding Generation Equality's initial five-year journey (2021–2026).

Young feminists have played critical roles in the last five years of the GEF, right from the moment of conceptualisation in 2019, influencing, youth organising and mainstreaming meaningful youth feminist leadership across this multistakeholder space, Action Coalitions, mid term point, youth led accountability and continue leading role in strategising for the next GEF journey.

Youth Coalition has been one of the vocal youth action coalition leaders and made significant contribution in the GEF process on youth engagement, accountability and youth organising, including a Young Feminist Unconference, a Youth Commitment Makers Town Hall, and the co-convening of the Midpoint Moment Youth Spotlight Session which created safe spaces for young people to shape GEF priorities, share progress and challenges in delivering commitments, and amplify youth leadership at the Generation Equality midpoint.

With that background, María León from Youth Coalition had a sit down interview with two vocal youth leaders Eunice Leyva Garcia and Xenia Kellner, who shaped young feminist engagement in the GEF process. Eunice Leyva Garcia is a former Executive Director of the Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights and youth leader of the GEF Action Coalition on SRHR & Bodily Autonomy. Xenia Kellner is a founder and former Executive Director of the Young Feminist Europe and youth leader of the GEF Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership.

In this episode, Eunice and Xenia walk us through the journey of youth organizing in the GEF, its impact on the process and lessons for current and future youth and young feminist movements.



YOUTH MOVEMENT BUILDING WITHIN THE GEF: WHERE IT ALL STARTED

María León: Could you quickly walk us through the journey of the youth constituency and movement within Generation Equality?

Xenia Kellner: I should start off because I was present during the inceptional phase. Eunice joined the space later. The whole GEF process started in mid or last quarter of 2019. The process began with the multi-stakeholder governance structure, and part of it was the Civil Society Advisory Group (CSAG). The Group had a 30% youth quota, to which Young Feminist Europe (my organisation) was seating. There was the Youth Task Force (YTF), which was set up by UN Women and was constituted by around 30 young people from diverse backgrounds. This was one of the interesting things about GEF's first governance structure because you could already see the impact of young feminist leadership on governance and power shifting.

So I realized at some point, the youth task force didn't sit in the multi-stakeholder governance structure, meaning they were not seated at the decision making table. The Youth Task Force always sat on the sidelines with the UN women and UN Youth Office. But the Youth Office did not really have decision making power. The Task Force was not set up by an independent civil society group, like the CSAG, which was selected by civil society. Rather, the Task Force had been set up by UN Women. So, I started connecting and engaging with the Youth Task Force more directly and saw what their vision for this process was.

This was the first powerful shift, which really took a lot of pushing and a lot of organizing behind the scenes to connect and create youth-led spaces. The Young Feminist Europe started to host more collaborative spaces with youth organizers together. Youth organising gave us collective power and took away our fear. I remember one of the first complicated things among the Youth Task Force members was a lot of fear to just work around UN women, or just be even in the youth space and because apparently if we did this, the UN system won't forget and we will be jeopardising our future engagements and careers.

María León: Anha! And what did you take of this?

Xenia Kellner: From my understanding, as a young person in such a space, you should use that youth power to create change beyond just you. This organizing around UN Women really had to happen because UN Women was blocking a lot of the collective action by the Youth Task Force. Many of the task force meetings seemed more like update meetings with UN Women only speaking.

María León: So are you saying it was a tokenistic space for the task force?

Xenia Kellner: There wasn't a clear collective vision for what actually the role of the task force was. They did not have a definition. They did not have answers to a lot of questions.

Like, what's my role? What should I do in space? Are we working collectively? What can we influence? What can we do? Do we have agenda setting powers?

When COVID hit, we already knew there would be an extension of the co-creation process of the space. So, the first big change and impact on the governance structure we had was that the Youth Task Force received an official seat at the core group joining Mexico, France, UN Women and CSAG, in all working groups and also became independent from UN Women. The Task Force also got an independent budget. Now the money thing caused some friction because UN Women and the Youth Office were not happy.

María León: Is that where the Young Feminist Manifesto came in?

Xenia Kenner: Not yet but at this point, there was a shift in youth engagement and the language for it. Differentiating youth-led organizations, youth-focused, youth-centered organizations, or youth programs and advisory groups of organizations. So, realizing the importance of youth-led organizations, in the conceptualization of the action coalitions, we managed to get two seats for each action coalition for youth-led organizations.

María León: And how was the reception among Youth Led Organizations?

Xenia Kellner: Initially, very few people and organizations understood the concept of Action Coalitions and few had applied to join. So we reopened the application for youth-led organizations and we received hundreds of applications from YLOs. The selection process was led by civil society and youth across the globe. Contention raised because the action coalitions had already started working on their blueprints because UN Women had wanted to launch them by February or March of 2021. And the youth leaders and commitment makers who were selected came in so late and they had not shaped the blueprints. Youth Coalition was the only youth led organization that was already onboard because it had applied in the first round. So we pushed for the process to be reopened because we needed more YLOs. UN Women really pushed back against this flexibility. And that's when the Young Feminist Manifesto came into play. We needed to challenge this power dynamic and so we mobilized a lot of other stakeholders to support us. The blue prints process was reopened and that was the first impact of the manifesto. And that was when the youth leaders came in.

Eunice Garcia: I also joined late. No, we were notified almost right after I started my role at the Youth Coalition. I started representing the Youth Coalition in the meetings for the Action Coalition. I came on board, and one of the things that I noticed right away was that UN Women had a very predetermined idea of what the participation of youth-led organizations in this space would look like. I didn't even know that there were other constituencies of youth in this process. I only thought that it was only the youth leaders in the action coalitions. We didn't know anything about the Youth Task Force. We were not connecting with it. There was no effort to link the youth groups to work together.

Xenia Kellner: They were even trying to prevent the youth connection because we had requested to get connected with the Action Coalition youth leaders quite often. And they just didn't share the contacts. It was so difficult to connect as young people within the process.

Eunice Garcia: I really think that there has to be a space for young people to come together and to understand who is in the space. And who is doing what, and what is our collective vision? Because that is part of convening power to design a common vision. This is part of the infrastructure that is missing in the ecosystem. Like, there is not a lot. One of the things that I requested from UN Women was to allow the Youth Coalition to host a youth space. So, the first thing that we did in January 2021 was to host a space only for young people, where we invited all the Action Coalition leaders and all the Youth Task Force members. We needed collective discussions on how to hold UN women and other partners accountable in terms of youth engagement. And that's how we came up with the idea of the Young Feminist Manifesto, a document we needed to align our positionality.

The whole process of the blueprints is another parenthesis. The blue prints were just a mere policy paper. So, we came up with the Young Feminist Manifesto to demand for youth engagement in the design of the process. The process was badly designed. For example, the times where they wanted to do things didn't match the previous work and specific moments such as the Paris Forum and then the Mexico City Forum.

Xenia Kellner: I think that there had been some collective organizing happening before but I felt like I carried so much of it, and a lot of people didn't understand this collective organising that includes challenging power. When Eunice came in, she understood the vision and it was easy to bond with her.

Eunice Garcia: And that is the absolute importance of investing in good leadership. Xenia and I had conversations about how do we actually move this forward? What type of infrastructure do we need? What type of processes do we need? What type of design do we need? And that was the beginning of our beautiful friendship.

Xenia Kellner: Exactly. I know it took a while.

Eunice Garcia: I didn't trust her at first but I later realised we have similar thoughts and we became friends. And friendship is so political. We held each other's positionality. For example Xen, as a white feminist from the Global North, her role was specific in the youth movement of the GEF. Her position was something, and then on my side, I understood the power I held as the Executive Director of one of the big youth-led organizations in the ecosystem.

Xenia Kellner: Yeah, thank you.

Eunice Garcia: We also had internal reflections on our own roles and power, and worked to ensure that it's not only us but all young people. For instance during the midterm point, UN Women had only invited four young people. But we protested, came together and we decided that it's either all of us or none of us.

Xenia Kellner: One another important shift about the Young Feminist Manifesto is that it made us realise that having a seat at the table was not enough. We needed agenda-setting and convening powers. The first step was organizing a whole day workshop on power and power analysis. And then, going from theory to practice, analyzing the process, all of these things happened. Where are the power imbalances that we are experiencing? So we made power invisible, and we wrote it down. We designed how the process would look like. We defined our vision and an agenda for change. Finally, we were exercising power. And then the unconference followed. The idea of the Young Feminist unconference was to create a space where we don't just talk about transformation, but where transformation can take place.

Eunice Garcia: We had a lot of young people from around the world attend the unconference virtually because it was also during COVID. So it was also very challenging to have an online space that was inclusive. The space was penetrated by anti-rights groups. We just did not have to fill a quota like what the action coalition thematic leaders at that time were doing, at least in our action coalition. It was very unclear how decision-making was being made, and they restricted youth input to the blueprints. For instance, much of our Youth Coalition's input to the SRHR & Bodily Autonomy blueprint was omitted. Input on CSE, sex workers, and queer rights were not reflected. Even recommendations we provided in meetings were rejected. So, it was a huge fight because they wanted to launch the blueprint by February 2021, and we said no.



GEF IMPACT ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP

María León: What lasting changes do you see in youth leadership and youth participation and the youth movement as a result of the GEF?

Eunice Garcia: Well, as the Youth Coalition, we had started testing a new vision of youth leadership and organizing. For example the principles of the Young Feminist Manifesto informed our engagements in multilateral spaces and we had a lot of political support. We always referenced it during meetings with Canada.

Overall, the manifesto challenged the individual models of youth championship that a lot of global organizations still have, especially those inherited from the Global North. I think that was one of the most lasting principle on co-creation and co-design. Though I have to make the annotation that the ecosystem is still not ready to implement those principles. We have a lot of people in the ecosystem who are extremely bright in terms of policies and human rights but do not know how to design processes. The GEF was the first multi-stakeholder space we piloted that approach and of course it was going to have a lot of mistakes. And in the Young Feminist Manifesto, we were actually using strategic narrative language, like, moving away from using youth participation to youth engagement.

Xenia Kellner: No, not moving away entirely but just to highlight that those are different models.

Eunice Garcia: But youth participation is a rights-based language. Like, it has to do with political participation. Like, the right to political participation.

Xenia Kellner: Okay, with participation in general, but then let's say the engagement and leadership just having language that all of these are different things which have to do with different power you're giving someone in a process or in a role.

Eunice Garcia: Exactly.

Xenia Kellner: And I do think that was a strategic shift also for people to start thinking about that. And I do fully agree with the co-design. I think it has been a big source of frustration sometimes, but also, of course, that's the learning process, because I absolutely agree, there is a lot of people working with transformative designing and curating different spaces, that's not necessarily the expertise you would find in a global space. But I feel like that's something we brought, where it was very process-oriented.

Eunice Garcia: And I don't think that the ecosystem has fully understood why we worked like that. To us, the process is as important as the result, even more important. Because in the process is where you actually build the methodology to include people and to make these spaces accessible to everyone. Power lies in the connections that you can make.

For example there is a difference between having funding and having access to the funding. You have to build relationships and that is exactly how we made it possible to fund the Young Feminists. That is the power of the GEF and this new vision of leadership that we had was also something that we wanted to replicate for the Young Feminist Caucus with lessons drawn.

Xenia Kellner: I think that was how we built sustainable infrastructure and I think throughout the GEF process, we mobilized and politicized a lot of. So the Young Feminist Caucus and the impact on other stakeholders and how they think about youth has changed and will change, I think, also in funder spaces, hopefully.

María León: I can really see the links between those first moments of field organizing, power analysis and connection building and how it translated into what the Young Feminist Caucus is now. And how we're trying to sustain the structure for the youth movement to be able to run on its own. Building a sustainable young feminist infrastructure for youth organizing outside of institutions that future generations use to engage.

As this phase of the GEF closes, what work do you think remains unfinished especially for the young feminist movement?

Xenia Kellner: Creating that methodology and process at the beginning gave us the opportunity for collective envisioning for different futures. And now we've lost a lot of that. We already experienced pushback, in the multilateral system and so we need space to create progressive, bold agendas. I think the work on multi-stakeholder governance is quite interesting. I hope that more of the methodology will be harvested. The learnings from GEF governance processes would be an interesting replica of it on a regional or even national level. I think that the biggest contribution of the GEF is the model, the methodology and the design. And young people can play a leadership role. If we talk about building feminist infrastructure, I definitely think that the GEF process has contributed to that. There are a lot of new coalitions. I think there was a lot of learning across multi-stakeholder spaces.

María León: Thank you, Xenia, and I completely agree with you on building bold agendas is super important, and that it's hard. I feel like it's a little bit harder to do it now.

Xenia Kellner: No, but not to get me wrong, I think it's difficult to continue creating visions and different realities if you know this will not be implemented due to lack of funding. Of course, building dreaming spaces. I think it's important to keep hoping to imagine something different, but also at some point you need to put something into practice as well. I hope that some of the young people who have been in the space and have been supported, will pass it on. Are there new people stepping in who fill the shoes? A strategic space is shrinking back to some of the old structures. What role can youth play a role in challenging exactly that?

María León: Exactly! The Young Feminist Caucus recognizes the need to expand our constituency and create a more inclusive space. While we have established our role within groups like the Birdsong Collective and Women's Rights Caucus, our next goal is to open this space for sharing power and knowledge, ensuring it remains dynamic and collaborative as part of our governance process.

Eunice Garcia: Oh yeah, one thing the GEF did was have a long-lasting contribution on how the ecosystem works in support of supporting young youth leadership.

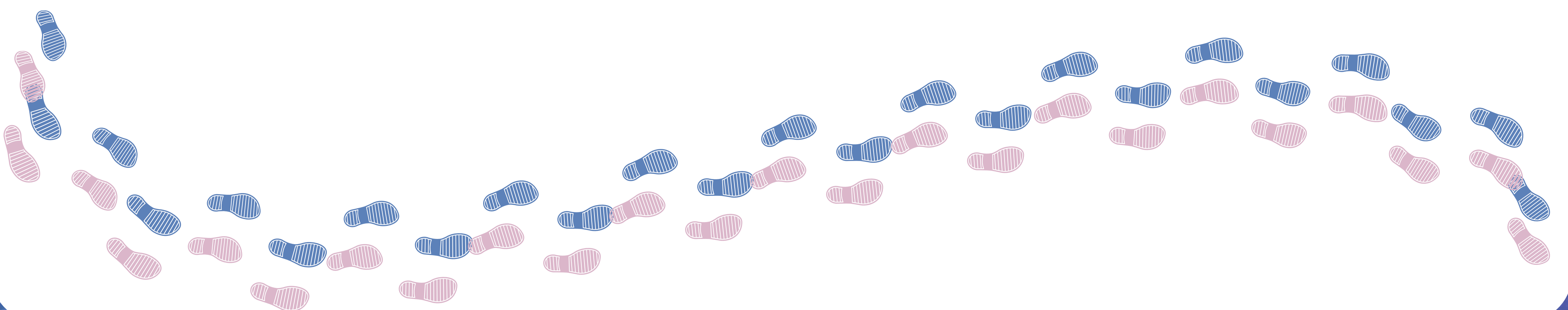
And I think that that's something that the Birdsong Collective did particularly well, and I thank the UN Foundation, because they gave the YFC space to co-create and co-lead better processes with other coalitions that are way better established.

Xenia Kellner: It started with the bridge builders. So the UN Foundation was asking what would be helpful for youth and the first thing we did was to set up these bridge builders between youth and then other stakeholders. And then from there, I think also this thing coalition building needs funding because it's an additional work to our profile. If you do advocacy work in a feminist way, you don't just do it for your organization. You're also now collectively organizing with others, reflecting your power, sharing, seeing where you bring others and you're also the changemaker within your organization, and to transform your organization, because you then need to bring back these reflections on power and the positionality of the organization. So then there needs for more funding for coalition building and collective feminist work.

Eunice Garcia: How do you think that you can use your power in a better way, like, in service of the group, in service of the movement? And I think that is some finished work, also, sorry, sorry, is to have more spaces for political clarity and political coherence.

Xenia Kellner: Oh my god, María, I would love to talk about this with you. When we have more time. Because I do come from a long line of communist movement activists. So it's quite interesting to also see how the communist movement and this collective envisioning and hope was also repressed. So it was also with defunding. What is happening now has been happening before. And so I would love to also pick your brain about what I'm looking for.

María León: For example, with the funding that we got for the Young Feminist Caucus, we have managed to start building a governance structure, and that's also what UNF said to us, right? Like, this grant is made so that you can, like, establish yourselves. And then kind of start pooling funding from other places like a learning process with the other coalitions.



CONTINUITY: LESSONS TO NEXT GENERATION OF YOUNG FEMINIST ORGANISING

María León: So what advice would you give to the next generation of young feminist leaders and organizers?

Eunice Garcia: It's about your struggles, it's not just about mindlessly repeating the same process we've been doing. It's not just a matter of comparing one vision against another. People need to be deeply reflective about their leadership.

Xenia Kellner: Maybe understanding power as something neutral in the first place where you challenge power. But sometimes that's where we get stuck. And that also happened honestly in the youth space during the GEF. I think it is just natural that we can fight, challenge ourselves and hold each other accountable in our movement, so it's fine. I feel like there needs to be some tolerance and space to learn from each other.

Eunice Garcia: Xenia and I learned more from each other in moments where we were in disagreement. But also make sure that you trust the person that you are disagreeing with. Make sure that you are able to build trust. But obviously we have never disagreed on the most basic things that are our principles and our values.

Xenia Kellner: And I think it's important to have this trust that if there's something that maybe you're not doing right, which is fine, like that happens all the time, especially learning in a leadership role, right? So having, trusting that. People would come to you instead of maybe just disengaging or talking behind their back.

Eunice Garcia: It is so important to have someone to challenge you and question you.

Xenia Kellner: Right.

María León: Yeah, I love that closing lesson and advice on unfinished work for the youth movement and to build spaces where we can hold conflict and disagree and kind of use that as a way of establishing a political horizon together.

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