
INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVISM & INTERSECTIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Curated Discussion Report #2

DECEMBER 2020



INTRODUCTION

The Generation Equality Forum (GEF) is a global gathering for gender equality, convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France in close partnership with civil society. Commencing in Mexico City from the 29th to 31st of March, and culminating in June in Paris, the Forum will launch a set of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality.

Over two sessions on the 30th of November and 2nd of December 2020, the GEF convened the second Curated Discussion, focusing on the topic of 'intergenerational activism and intersectional youth leadership'. The purpose of the Curated Discussions initiative is to bring together a group of select and diverse gender advocates to cultivate insights and contributions around key topics for the GEF. The insights that are synthesized in this report will feed into the design and the outcomes of the Forum and aim to strengthen multi-stakeholder alliance building.

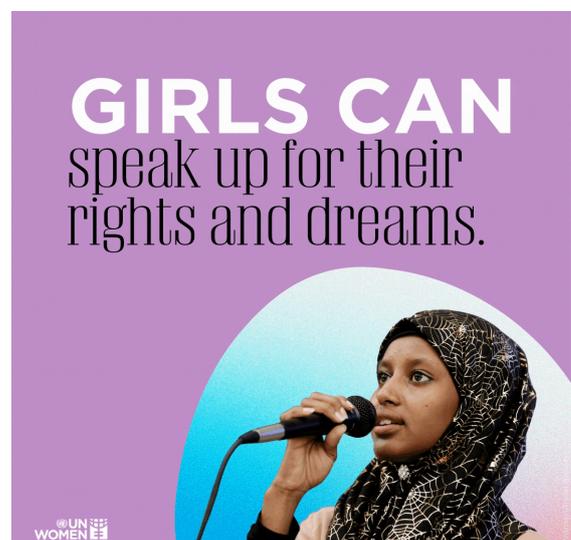
The two sessions hosted approximately 150 attendees from diverse age groups, locations and backgrounds, contributing to a rich discussion. The content of this report is drawn from the plenary and breakout groups across both sessions, highlighting themes, thoughts and summarizing the key recommendations shared by participants on how to integrate an intergenerational approach throughout every step of the Generation Equality journey.

WHY IS FOSTERING MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT A PRIORITY FOR THE GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM?

The GEF is an intergenerational initiative centring the voices and perspectives of young people in order to engage a new generation of innovative and powerful activists in the drive to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

To date, the Generation Equality Youth Task Force has been a key force supporting and guiding the global processes in consulting and engaging young people across the globe. The Task Force was integrated into the Governance Structure of the Forum in September 2020 and holds a decision-making role in the design of the Forum and its activities, as well as the Action Coalitions.

The centralization of youth voices in decision-making is a testament to the importance that the GEF has placed on intergenerational and multi-stakeholder partnership, which is a key strategy to foster lasting movements of solidarity and consolidate the bold progress that both the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda have promised.



SPEAKERS

Intergenerational Dialogue

The Curated Discussion opened with an intergenerational dialogue between diverse speakers. Drawing on their lived experience and expertise the panelists discussed key questions and framed the broader context of youth activism and leadership. Participants also had the opportunity to engage with the speakers by submitting questions via the chat function, some of which were answered throughout the conversation.

Session One: 30th November 2020



Ruth Miller

Indigenous Rights and
Climate Activist



Mary Robinson

Chair of The Elders, Former President
of Ireland and former UN High
Commissioner for Human Rights



Fernanda Heredia

Chilean Indigenous
Rights Activist

Session Two: 2nd December 2020



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Executive Director of
UN Women



Tan Ejin

Advocay Champion with the World
Association of Girl Guides and Girl
Scouts (WAGGGS)



Everjoice Win

Social Justice and
Women's Rights
Leader



Sarah Awad

Youth Activist and External Represent-
ative of the World Association of Girl
Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS)

KEY THEMES RAISED IN THE DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: The changing context of celebrating the GEF and Action Coalitions

The context in which the GEF is going to be celebrated is radically different than how it was originally envisioned. The world is going through the worst health crisis it has seen in centuries, and this has had a significant negative impact on women and girls. Our speakers shared what they thought were the most important insights that should inform the preparations for the GEF and the Action Coalitions in this new context:

Learn lessons from people at the margins

Ruth Miller and Everjoice Win highlighted that constituencies historically at the margins, for example indigenous women in Alaska and women from the Global South, have gathered insightful lessons over time on how to address devastating losses of lives and resources that resonate and are relevant in the context of COVID-19. It is often from these marginalized spaces that the most effective solutions have been elaborated to address structural and existential threats such as the pandemic that we are now facing. Therefore, the GEF should be a space where the lessons learned from ancestors and women from the Global South can be shared through innovative formats including storytelling events. Such events would allow current generations to “remember forward” when designing policies and plans to address the current crisis. In addition, centering stories from the frontlines will help to define the most effective and compassionate solutions to crisis, as it has been shown through the experience of the climate justice movement.

Address stereotypes and ensure digital accessibility

Mary Robinson and Fernanda Heredia emphasized the need to change a mindset dominated by “adultism” and replace it with a recognition of the power of young people and their mobilization. Social media is a particularly key platform to make the voices of young people heard. In addition, Tan Ejin underscored the importance of tackling the digital divide that has been amplified during the pandemic and is intersected by both age and gender. Addressing issues of accessibility would ensure that all women and girls have access to powerful platforms and can be active change-makers.

Create space for different voices and perspectives, especially those of young people, at the decision-making table

Sarah Awad and Tan Ejin highlighted the importance of recognizing intersectional and intergenerational discrimination in order to intentionally include the most disadvantaged constituencies in decision-making processes and recognize and address the needs of all women. Therefore, it is critical for the GEF and the Action Coalitions to be truly intergenerational and intersectional and ensure that young people are part of decision-making processes in a non-tokenistic manner. UN Women’s Executive Director added that, by ensuring significant investment and making spaces available for youth and for non-conventional leaders to voice their perspective, the work being carried out now can also be effectively taken forward into the future to ensure sustainable and irreversible change. Having such a diversity of actors involved in the fight for gender equality enriches the outcome and the results achieved.

“I believe we need to forge a genuinely respectful relationship between the generations where yes there is a wisdom of experience, but there is also an active, informed and digitally smart way of dealing with the present, current problems and that must be given far more space.”



Mary Robinson

Theme 2: Sources of youth inspiration and empowerment

Foster connection and work together

Ruth Miller and Sarah Awad underscored that what inspires and motivates them is the awareness of being part of a community that works towards a mutual goal, and the fact that this community is operating at global, regional, national and local levels. This makes the individual feel supported and empowered to speak up when needed. UN Women's Executive Director also highlighted that it is the ability to work together and be part of collectives that allows activists go far and make solid progress. This is the logic and spirit of Generation Equality, which seeks to collectively drive forward something that started 25 years ago in Beijing.

“ I am fighting a mindset. I am fighting a value system that was infused in our global hierarchy that taught us that some people were resources to be exploited by other people. ”



Ruth Miller

Language

Fernanda Heredia raised the issue of language and terminology and the importance of de-mystifying the word “feminism” to stand for a movement for justice, rather than a direct attack against men.

Recognize the power of individual actions

Tan Ejin highlighted that, even if at times it might be challenging to believe that the actions of one single individual can make a significant impact, change starts from one person and their ability to generate a “chain of change”. In this context, Everjoice Win recalled that when the 16 Days of Activism Campaign was designed, nobody believed that it would actually become a long-standing global campaign. This is an example of what feminist activism, ideas, and agenda setting can do. The internet holds incredible power and provides the opportunity to communicate, campaign, connect and build movements, and this should be utilized whenever possible.

Recognize injustice and continue fighting to achieve equality

Fernanda Heredia emphasized that the persistence of gender injustices is what motivates her and many young people to continue fighting. Young people need to continue mobilize for the elimination of historic issues that affect women such as child marriage and harassment. In this context, raising awareness is critical to ensure that people recognize that the struggle for justice remains essential as discrimination persists between men and women. In addition, Ruth Miller highlighted the importance of underscoring the pervasiveness of systems of exploitation and extraction of resources, and the effects that these structures have on women and girls.

Theme 3: Barriers to access and how to overcome them

Deep accessibility

Ruth Miller also highlighted that in order to address barriers to access, it is essential to go beyond providing connection in rural areas to deeper considerations. For example, we must also think about how we are communicating, what we are asking of those that we are soliciting inputs and seeking leadership from, what language we are sharing, and how we are being creative in uplifting multiple forms of storytelling, which is an effective method of ensuring the accessibility of content through narratives.

Online harassment

Tan Ejin explained that hate speech is common in virtual spaces, meaning that providing safety and security online must be a priority for the GEF and the Action Coalitions. In addition, providing support for young people active in the virtual world on how to navigate these new and emerging challenges is needed to ensure that they do not feel isolated and can continue to engage.

Interrelating crises and structures of oppression

Mary Robinson and Ruth Miller spoke about the fact that gender issues are deeply interrelated, for example with the climate crisis and its gendered causes and manifestations. Ruth Miller explained that viewing and addressing barriers as interrelated and a historical genealogy is crucial for addressing the structural issues that are being faced by young people today. Being aware (as both individuals and groups) about the patriarchal structures we are complicit in is an essential first step towards dissolving and resisting these hierarchies.

“We need to be aware of intersectional discrimination, which means we need to be intentional in our thinking about who is the most disadvantaged and work hard to build connections with them so they can voice their challenges and share their stories.”



Sarah Awad

Addressing tokenism and adulthood

Sarah Awad emphasized that young voices are commonly de-legitimized given their limited experience in the “adult world”. This rhetoric needs to be rectified and young people need to be aware of what possible avenues they can take to get involved in the feminist movement. Tan Ejin agreed that intergenerational discrimination is the biggest challenge being faced by young activists, compounded by a lack of female role models and limited access to leadership and decision-making positions.

Institutional sexism

Fernanda Heredia and Ruth Miller both expressed that it is not possible to fight sexism without first recognizing the suffering that those women who came before us have been through. That is why, if we want girls to know and learn about feminism, they need to understand the history of feminism and the things that women have experienced throughout the decades, including the lack of the right to vote or be educated. In this context, Mary Robinson referred to the poem written by Eavan Boland titled “Our Future Will Be The Past of Other Women” that illustrates the notion beautifully.

Theme 3: The importance of partnerships

The role of men

UN Women’s Executive Director emphasized that engaging men in a deeper way is critical and failure to do so would be detrimental to the objective of achieving gender equality. In particular, she highlighted that men should not be bystanders and should actively challenge everyday sexism and participate in conversations around it. In addition, male figures at the community and institutional level, including religious leaders, have a key role to play in addressing and challenging patriarchal norms.

Collaboration

Everjoice Win reiterated the importance of thinking intersectionally in order to tackle cross-cutting issues. Activists need to learn to organize in a cross-movement, cross-issue way and share strategies and refer partners to one another. Working together, finding partnerships, and being intentionally intersectional in our approach is what will help us to deal with intersecting problems.

Developing respectful partnerships

Mary Robinson explained that there has been a shift from looking at specific issues to developing respectful and “holistic” partnerships. She also highlighted how issues manifest themselves differently across the generations and that active listening is crucial to build partnerships that effectively address them. An example of how to foster this respectful partnership would be to ensure that high-level panels are not only gender balanced, but also have youth participation where the youth do not speak last. UN Women’s Executive Director emphasized that the art of cultivating partnerships must be part of the toolbox that young people develop in order to be able to collaborate with a variety of actors.

“The unique thing for Generation Equality and the feminism of the future is its inclusiveness; the ability to embrace people in all their diversity and learn to work together on issues of common interest.”



Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

BREAKOUT ROOMS: PART ONE

IDENTIFYING BARRIERS AND BUILDING SOLUTIONS



What barriers and challenges are faced by young people in their activism and leadership at the National, Regional and Global level?

Perceptions and stereotypes

Strong stereotypical biases and adultism are present in many spaces. Age is commonly used in a patronizing way to delegitimize claims made by girls, who are seen as too young to be experts and are often silenced or tokenized. As a result, youth perspectives are commonly either reduced and homogenized or not included at all in outcomes.

Lack of access

Young people lack access to formal decision-making spaces. This has been exacerbated by backlash, violence and closing of civic space. Barriers to access include complexity of engagement processes, lack of access to technology, technical language used by different generations and political hierarchies based on age and other intersecting parameters.

Funding limitations

Inflexible funding criteria limit the eligibility of girl-led and youth-led organizations and movements to receive grants and funding. Organizations need to be formally registered, have several years of audited financial records, need an adult to receive funding and so forth. Donors are therefore not equipped to move resources to girl and youth groups, especially informal groups.

Lack of financial remuneration

Activism is often perceived as unpaid labour, resulting in exploitation of youth and a lack of fair compensation for work. This in turn cyclically enforces the perception of youth lacking expertise and legitimacy.

Psychological barriers

High expectations and pressure, unhealthy competitiveness, collective exhaustion, burnout, and lack of space to rest and recharge are all common experiences for young activists.

Safety concerns

Cyber-bullying is rife, particularly on social media platforms. There is a lack of safety, support and safeguarding for young activists in these spaces.

What concrete actions should be developed to support young feminist movements by different stakeholders?

Evidence and data

Better understand girls' and young people's organizing and activism in humanitarian and local contexts. Adopt an evidence-based and research-driven approach to encourage the production, use and dissemination of key data and knowledge products about youth empowerment and its relation to gender equality.

Funding

Offer flexible funding over multiple years. Support youth organizations in building capacity to navigate funding processes and also work to simplify such processes. Involve young people in decision-making around resourcing.

Communication

Increase multimedia communication through, for example, art, zines, social media and song. Increase funding for advocacy and empowerment campaigns targeting youth audiences. Amplify young people's work and accomplishments.

Intergenerational learning

Provide spaces for intergenerational learning and spaces to learn together. Seek out youth partnership and uplift youth-led organizations through organizational mentorship opportunities.

Technology

Work to bridge the digital divide and provide access to computers and the internet or young people where possible.

Inclusion

Enhance diversity and representation within the category of youth itself. Provide translation and other measures to facilitate participation in multiple languages.

Policy

Shift policy orientation towards youth empowerment both nationally and internationally. Establish youth councils as a sounding board to governments and their counterparts in decision making. Create programmes dedicated to increasing youth engagement in the policy making process.



How do you reimagine intergenerational leadership and activism, and how can intersectional youth mobilization contribute to shaping alternative visions of the world?

A) What inspires you to participate in this process? What is holding you/youth back?

Lack of awareness

Many have experienced barriers to access – for example not being aware of the spaces available to young voices – and now want to support in making new spaces available and inclusive, and to raise awareness of these opportunities.

Lack of understanding

Generations have very different ways of thinking and expressing themselves, and this results in misunderstandings. More broadly, the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘activism’ are often misunderstood and maligned.

Challenging environments

It is difficult to engage in spaces where one feels unwelcome. There is also often the fear of cultural backlash. Young women are also affected by unrealistic social expectations, which make them particularly fearful of making mistakes. As a result of this, young women are less likely to ‘speak up’ in public contexts or events and take a leadership role in their communities.

Role models and mentoring

A big motivator is when young people can see movements led by girls and youth in all their diversity and can view these activists as role models. It is important for girls to recognize that inequality persists and then explore how we see it, feel it and bring it forward.

Representation and inclusion

Youth voices and messages are often passed along by older intermediaries rather than youth themselves. Therefore, youth still do not have a direct seat and voice at the table. Furthermore, youth are often invited to meetings in a listening, rather than speaking capacity.

B) How can we ensure meaningful youth leadership at all levels of decision making?

Communication and training

Train young people to negotiate and communicate with power. Encourage young people to educate older generations on how to better utilize social media to shift public opinion. Use social media platforms to gather information about what the key issues are for younger generations. Avoid using academic discourse when communicating and have dialogues in concrete language about everyday life.

Governments and policy making

Gather youth and adolescents in working groups to shape public policies and boost ownership in ministerial and governmental sectors. Quotas could be used to ensure that young people are represented in decision-making and can exchange their thoughts with older leaders.

Movement building

Strengthen local activism through fostering global networking and connections. Promote exchanges between young people around the world to encourage looking to groups in other regions to learn from each other and improve.

Diversity

Recognize that youth are not a homogeneous group. Apply intersectionality to consider the full spectrum of young people and make space for the different ways that people express themselves.

Create space

Create more spaces for youth to participate. Use schools and universities as a platform for engaging young people. Build safe spaces for all adolescents who engage, work hard to make them comfortable, and recognize the valuable lived experience that they have to share.

How can governments and institutions across the globe strengthen inter-generational, intersectional youth leadership within their organizations and work environments?

Sharing power

Share power between generations and create an ongoing conversation between them. Integrate youth at an institutional level to protect their voices and ensure that they are always heard. Give young people leadership opportunities wherever possible and engage youth in the definition of policies.

Involvement and inclusion

Employ affirmative action or quotas to increase youth participation in governance and development, as well as for participation in different activities such as programmes and international conferences. Create youth cells at all levels of decision-making throughout Government and bring leaders into mentor programmes.

Working methods/structures:

Experiment with new collective ways of working, such as through youth parliaments. Include young leaders in Government decision making and policymaking through fora like the Y7 and Y20. Create networks, dialog platforms, forums, debate tournaments and interest clubs.

Financial resources

Offer fair compensation for the time and expertise of young people. Allow youth to propose and launch their own projects as opposed to just participating in what is offered already. Dedicate a specific budget to support access for young people. Lower tax rates for young, socially conscious entrepreneurs.



What are some best practices for youth engagement, and which of these can be replicated in different contexts?

Enabling environment

Ensure inclusiveness and horizontal structures in organizations and campaigns and actively provide spaces for youth engagement and leadership. Build a culture of active engagement to avoid tokenism. Fully integrate youth spaces as opposed to keeping them siloed. Embed accountability measures in projects.

Innovative engagement mechanisms

Support youth start-ups and youth parliaments, develop action plans for individuals who hope to contribute through small initiatives, create a platform which lists events to make it easier to discover opportunities to participate.

Education

Educate people in positions of authority that work with youth on these issues. Redesign school curriculums to include issues like sustainability and gender equality. Educate young people about different participatory methods.

Diversity

Represent diverse constituencies within the youth population involved in decision making processes, including the voices of men and boys and those of people with other gender identities such as trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Teach diversity from an early age and bolster processes through inclusiveness and intersectionality requirements.

BREAKOUT ROOMS: PART TWO

CONCRETE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FORUM



How do we ensure that people of all generations are meaningfully engaged in the GEF side events?

Model the Spirit of Collaboration and Drive Co-Ownership

The events should model collaborative, non-hierarchical ways of interacting with one another and should present a space for listening and learning as well as for shaping action. The spirit of intergenerational collaboration should drive the content and structure of the events, and youth should be given the opportunity to lead in their development where possible. Training in deep listening should be provided to strengthen intergenerational engagement and foster solidarity.

Support Marginalized Groups by Providing Resources for Participation

All of the work around the side events requires resources, which means that for events to be diverse and representative, resources must be provided to groups that are historically excluded from accessing them, including youth-led organizations and especially groups representing marginalized communities. This must stretch beyond financing and include informative resources, such as on-demand preparatory training to support participation or facilitation.

Use Innovative and Intentional Engagement Mechanisms

Engagement in the GEF should be inclusive, intentional, mutually beneficial, and participants should feel that their involvement has value and impact. To achieve this, the side events must be representative throughout their creation phases. By involving diverse constituents in the planning processes, the events will take on increased meaning and their impacts will be enhanced. In the events themselves, interactive activities, such as diversity circles, are a good example of meaningful engagement mechanisms, along with using live polls to dictate the direction of an event, which helps to make participants feel empowered.

Leverage the power of storytelling

In the first GEF Curated Discussion, speakers Mozn Hassan and Sophia Pierre Antoine highlighted the importance of storytelling in shaping how we frame issues and build responses. The GEF should recognize that the arts are an effective way to tell stories and break down barriers to participation. Storytelling should be integrated into the preparations, activities and outcomes of the side events. Cross-generational storytelling could be used to frame discussions, and stories of success could kickstart some events. There should also be a dedicated side event on meaningful storytelling and its impact. Local systems can help to gather stories through existing channels, utilizing already established platforms in order to bring a variety of voices and experiences into the Forum.

How do we overcome the additional barriers to meaningful engagement in a virtual world?

Make accessibility planning a priority

Integrate accessibility considerations at every step of the planning processes

Assess and choose all platforms that are used in relation to the Forum based on their inclusive design

Add non-digital channels for those that can't access the internet at all, such as radio networks, "watch parties" at embassies or community spaces, etc.

Build the virtual platform with accessibility as a foremost consideration

The space should accommodate the broadest range of languages possible

Use existing networks to ensure connectivity

Build on existing networks and systems and utilize public resources for connectivity

Secure sponsorship for data packages to help participants get online

Feed local expertise and experience into the approaches to ensure connectivity in their areas

Make arrangements for phone-in options for participation

Offer planned connectivity at specific locations

Outreach must be done to bridge the digital divide

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the GEF and Action Coalitions

1. The GEF should create an environment that fosters and champions the leadership of youth and adolescents

Young representatives should lead on engagement, and groups that speak “on behalf” of youth or adolescents should have to prove active engagement by youth. The Forum should intentionally carve out time and space for youth to share their voices, as it can be intimidating for a young person to speak up without being invited to do so, and youth should not be invited to speak last. The leadership and strength of adolescent voices should be specifically recognized through concerted efforts to ensure their inclusion and targeted opportunities to showcase their leadership. Small committee sessions for young people could encourage them to speak out and highlight their participation. Finally, the contributions offered by young participants should be carried through and accurately reflected in any decision and outcome.

2. The GEF should foster collaboration and explore synergies between diverse actors

There must be cross-sectoral dialogues, both formal and informal, which encourage deep listening and engagement with participants to help enhance understanding of each other’s work and values. This will help to ensure continuity and longevity of collaboration following the GEF. Teambuilding exercises prior to the Forum could also support this. There should be a focus on co-creating relevant solutions together with diverse young actors included throughout their development and implementation. The GEF should champion mentorship and showcase how generations can learn from each other throughout this process and how everyone can benefit from intergenerational contact, for example by creating opportunities for intergenerational networking or offering a side event on mentorship.

3. Intentional work must be done to improve access and inclusion in the Forum

The GEF must acknowledge the different ways in which physical and connectivity barriers manifest and affect different generations, and address these barriers accordingly. Resources should be dedicated to reach groups that have historically had less access, and cross-generational and cross-cultural representation should be a priority. The platform that is created must promote intersectionality and ensure that voices of young people in all of their diversity are included and heard. Clear policy guidelines should be set out for platform users to ensure the creation of a safe space. The provision of protections including countering cyber-harassments and other risks associated with online platforms is essential.

4. The Forum should expand its outreach to engage a broader group of young people

The GEF conversation needs to be expanded beyond the youth constituents already reached, with a particular emphasis on supporting the participation of grassroots youth movements and organizations. Outreach needs to be decentralized and embedded in the local context to help improve access. High outreach targets should be set with integrated accountability structures as a driving incentive for this work. There should also be a focus on utilizing relevant communications channels to reach and engage young people, such as through social media, television, and radio.

5. Accountability structures for youth participation should be integrated throughout the Forum and the Action Coalitions

Accountability is vital to protect the voices of youth. There must be accountability structures to ensure young people's meaningful involvement throughout the Forum processes, from ensuring inclusion of youth and adolescent voices in decision making to having the voices of young people directly represented at Forum events. Similarly, the Action Coalitions must have clear accountability frameworks. The Action Coalition leaders should develop the Actions that focus specifically on adolescent girls through deep consultation with these stakeholders and should then be held directly accountable by this constituency throughout their five-year implementation period.

6. The Forum should be a space for intergenerational exchange, listening and learning

The GEF should encourage learning about partnerships. It should offer spaces to reflect on how to approach partnerships, how to foster connections between the right organizations and leaders, how to lift up leaders from minority groups as role models for all. The GEF could provide training on how to facilitate intergenerational dialogues and learning, and how generations can work together to counter harmful social norms. The Forum could also provide intergenerational listening zones to build awareness and sensitivity. The opportunity should also be taken to educate young activists on the importance and value of engaging with multilateral institutions and how to navigate these structures and spaces.

7. Creativity should be a leading principle throughout the design and preparation of the Forum

The GEF needs to break the mold, and this will only be done by bringing diverse voices into the planning processes and decision-making structures. Creative ways need to be found to localize the GEF and engage with grassroots organizations and women who are marginalized, such as by placing an emphasis on storytelling. The GEF should also be creative and innovative in its communication strategies, using methods like hosting video-projected events (live or offline) to reach new audiences, sharing self-care guides, and communicating concretely on outcomes. The GEF should expand beyond the traditional, formal structures of international conferences and challenge the status quo.

THANK YOU

We would like to offer our deepest thanks to all those who committed their time to make this Curated Discussion as rich and empowering as possible, and look forward to continuing the GEF journey together, in solidarity.

For more information, visit our website: forum.generationequality.org

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In partnership
with civil society
and youth