

The Girls' Summit

Centering the power of adolescent girls

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Introduction

The Girls' Summit was a liberatory and joyful moment grounded in sisterhood and a love ethic - two primary practices without which we are unable to transform the world. This convening encouraged conversations that are not always welcome in other spaces. It fostered sisterhood and connection that smashed walls and borders set up between and around girls by various systems of dominance. ***This convening model was a reminder that cultivating practices of sisterhood at a young age is not only possible but is key to a radical political vision for our intergenerational and cross-regional liberation. We are in awe of the vocal, fearless and passionate girls who stood in community with each other during the Girls' Summit and vowed to unite and fight for a better world.***

The convening also reminded us of the power of hope. It is hard to stay hopeful when we know that girls face the devastating violence of patriarchy at very young ages. Girls will have internalised patriarchy before they even have a chance to question why they are denied basic rights and fundamental freedoms. They will have believed that oppression is indestructible. They will have eventually surrendered to helplessness and profound despair. But there is healing power in belonging and

being in community. When girls gather, they practise love for freedom and advance our interconnected struggle for liberation.

Why Convene Girls?

Adolescence is a time of increased isolation for many girls. Adolescent girls navigate a host of social pressures and forms of violence that narrow their choices.

Unfortunately, girls are often underestimated even by adult feminists. At the same time, adolescent girls are also leaders. They imagine that life could be different and are willing to struggle for a different future. For generations, girls have been at the forefront of movements for social change.

When girls come together in safe spaces, they break down isolation and build collective power. When girls feel safe together, they explore options and process and share personal stories. These spaces are a place to unpack fear, vulnerability, resistance, and violence. Safe spaces are healing - they are an avenue to reconcile collective grief, trauma and suffering. For girls' spaces to be genuinely liberating, they must break out of assumptions about how much "lively" debate is acceptable. They must devote intention and resources toward strengthening community power and building partnerships.

Being a political home and a movement-building hub means offering and co-creating girls' spaces and convenings tailored to girls' priorities and needs. We hold space for girls to come together, learn, push back, connect, hope, dream, own their collective thinking, strategise and mobilise. If girls are to co-create the just world they imagine, we must support and resource their grassroots collective informal organising and

activism - especially within broader movements and across geographies and themes. When we support transnational solidarity, decolonial political knowledge, and movement building, girls' political power is unleashed, their organising is resourced in healthy and sustainable ways, and they move closer towards lives of safety, dignity and freedom.

Introducing the Girls' Summit

For the first time, in its tenth occurrence, the Africa Conference on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ACSHR) hosted a summit just for girls prior to the main conference. Fifty-one girls travelled from 15 countries across Africa to attend, many travelling internationally or alone for the first time. The one-day summit was an opportunity for girls to come together, connect, inspire each other, learn, strategise, and have a platform to talk about topics such as bodily autonomy, sex and pleasure, skills building and strengthening, wellbeing, sisterhood, safeguarding, and more.

As the day began, all the girls were provided with dignity kits and welcomed into the conference room which was instantly full of energy. Girls came with their zeal and zest - they came prepared to be together. The summit kicked off with a conversation between the Co-CEO of Purposeful, Rosa Bransky, the Director of With and For Girls, Purity Kagwiria, and the girls.

"We were born to walk beside girls like you so that your voices can be heard across Sierra Leone and the world. We believe all girls are born powerful, but things stand in our way, and girls need space to be together because friendship and sisterhood is the place where the revolution starts"

- Rosa Bransky

“Today is a dream and a homecoming for many of us, not having travelled for two years, to be able to be with each other as girls, to plan, to plot this revolution, and figure out how to be in community with each other”

- Purity Kagwiria

During the opening, the girls quickly connected with one another and affirmed who they were to the room; in their words, they are leaders, they are activists, and they are feminists.

“It’s clear we face the same challenges, even though we are from different countries”

- Rose, Kenya Resource Centre for Women

Reflections from the Girls

A few months after the summit, we sat down with some of the girls who attended to talk about their experiences of and reflections on the Girls’ Summit and main conference. We have intentionally relied on quotes from our conversations with girls to document the key moments of the Girls’ Summit and girls’ perspectives of the summit. We do so as a way of removing our lens and analysis from understanding girls’ perspectives and in doing so, uplift girls’ voices, sharing their reflections with you all directly.

- Lee-Anne Jenkins (22). Senior Leader, Brave Rock Girls, South Africa.
- Cheasobuol “Cheche” Edwin Ogar (20). Care for the Young, Nigeria.

- Deborah “Debbie” Chumbu (19). Founder, Afroactivists, Malawi.
- Oumaima Guezir (19). Activist, Project Soar, Morocco.

Here is what we heard from the girls, condensed and edited for clarity:

“Coming together in a space where there are young people sharing ideas was beautiful. I learned, I unlearned, and it was actually amazing. I learned a whole lot to be very honest. I’m already implementing some of these things I learned in my projects...It was just beautiful coming together, meeting minds and...discussing and learning about so many things.”

- Cheche, Nigeria

“This conference for me was an opportunity to discover new information, and also meet new people with a shared purpose. I’m just 19 years old, and it was my first time to travel out of my country alone. It was a challenge for me to prepare my visa documents and everything, because I was in a [high] pressure time of studying and exams... But I challenged myself to do that. And it was so good for me; I feel satisfied about it.”

- Oumaima, Morocco

“I think sometimes we are fighting alone for equal rights, or for women’s rights, anything that women and girls want or need. Your message doesn’t come across as strongly as if you would have done it with a whole team behind you. If you fight alone, you might lose the battle. But if you fight together, there would be many positive outcomes... it’s important to bring us all together. Because I think that’s the

quickest way we can get solutions to our issues and situations that we find ourselves in.”

Lee-Anne, South Africa

“...it was very good... and also a powerful space for me because now I'm being reminded of what I do and also [that] other people are doing the same thing. It was very engaging for me. I really found it phenomenal to...now see what we can do together after COVID-19 to still push the work forward.”

Debbie, Malawi

What has been sparked/has come out of having a space just for girls?

“I came out of the space more confident. And also with this fresh passion to keep fighting and advocating for young women. Because it was very beautiful, rubbing minds with everybody... From the first day of the conference, there was this energy that was emanating from the women - very very positive energy. And it just fuelled my passion more. I came out of the space, and when I came back, I told myself, ‘yeah, I have work to do.’ I've been doing work but yes, I have work to do... I want to keep impacting. That was what the place made me feel... I still cannot get over it. It feels very surreal.”

- Cheche, Nigeria

“When I got there, when I first stepped foot out of the airport, I already felt that welcoming. The girls didn't know each other, but everyone was so welcoming. Everyone was so talkative. They were so nice that I felt at home. They made me feel better actually. Because I was still feeling like ‘I miss home, I miss my mom, I miss

this.' But when we got to the Summit, the sisterhood started forming immediately...

The sisterhood was there and that made me feel at peace."

- Lee-Anne, South Africa

"Everyone was comfortable. That made the engagement really fun. [This was important because] ...whilst learning, you also need to have fun. If you don't have fun, then I don't think you're going to learn."

- Debbie, Malawi

"The space made me feel good and safe. Everything was great because I met a lot of girls, a lot of women, a lot of activists from all of Africa. I found myself knowing many people, creating many friendship relationships, so it was really good. It gives me positive energy..."

- Oumaima, Morocco

Care and Wellbeing - what does care look like from a girl's perspective?

This session, led by Dr Leyla Hussein, a psychotherapist and international campaigner against FGM, aimed to unpack care and wellbeing for girls and equip them with tools for their own care and wellness throughout the time in the pre-conference and conference.

Dr Leyla helped make the links between feminism, self-care and healthy boundaries.

Many girls are taught not to say no and to put the needs of others ahead of their

own. As dedicated activists and leaders, girls are motivated to serve their communities. Not enough of us protect our wellbeing by setting boundaries and prioritising our own care. Dr Leyla affirmed that girls deserve to be well and have a right to set boundaries. She highlighted the importance of **“helping ourselves first.”** The girls were encouraged to think about and articulate their personal boundaries and dreams, and to create personal self-care plans for the duration of the conference.

Here were some of the takeaways from the session:

My hopes and dreams are:

- To work hard and support myself.
- To be happy.
- To be a feminist.
- A solution to violence.
- To build a safety wall for girls.
- To be a changemaker.
- End child marriage.

To take care of myself first: I always come first.

Dr Leyla’s session inspired Cheche to host a monthly check in and wellness activity for their team:

“We try to come together as a group and just dance [and] relieve ourselves of all the burdens that work is giving us. It's really disturbing and sad when you hear the stories of violence, being abused. It weighs me down sometimes, it weighs some of my team members sometimes because you hear some really horrible things these girls go through... When you put yourself in their shoes, it feels like it's weighing you down too. So we come together, talk about it, we listen to music, we also try as much as possible to exercise in the space. So we call it a wellness space, and [we] try to relieve ourselves of any problems we are having in relation to the stories or the work that we're doing...”

- Cheche, Nigeria

What did the girls enjoy?

“I was able to openly share things that in most spaces you're not allowed to share and the amount of good vibes coming from everyone else is so overwhelming.”

- Kimberly Blanch Shombe, 13. Kenya

“I'll talk about the theme, the African theme. It was very, you know, home. I could feel home, even though I was in a different ... country and... surrounded with different types of people. ... that made me feel really comfortable.”

- Debbie, Malawi

“...that session was great in the Girls' Summit. It was a moment to, to [get to] know all the girls, to really be in touch with the term sisterhood. So this was one of the

sessions I loved the most, because it was really great. I didn't feel that the time passed. And I'm feeling enjoying."

- Oumaima, Morocco

Our Bodies are Powerful and Beautiful with Nana Darkoa

Sekyiamah

African feminist and writer Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah created a space for the girls to openly ask questions about sex, pleasure and their bodies. No topics were off limits, no questions left unanswered. Nana facilitated a space of openness by sharing her own perspectives and experiences with the girls, and invited them not only to ask questions about their bodies, but to express their appreciation for the power and beauty of their own bodies by writing them love letters. The session resonated with many of the girls, inspiring considerations of bodily autonomy and underscoring the importance of understanding the inner workings of our bodies and the ways in which they communicate with us.

"That session really helped me a lot. It made me feel better about myself. We really talked about how we could appreciate our bodies more and how we could first find our bodies comfortable to be able to also feel comfortable around others. As an activist you see how many people cannot really go out there and advocate or talk to others because they simply are not comfortable with their bodies and not comfortable with themselves."

- Debbie, Malawi

“...After COVID-19, ... we were always indoors. So a lot of people were depressed, I myself was ... also going to depression, because now I had to think about school and had to think about my family and everything... That really did leave an impact on me. So after [Nana’s] session, I really thought I had to apologise to my body. I had to apologise to myself for ... questioning myself so much, and ... just being hard on myself because of ...experiences in the past... So I really do appreciate that session. It really made me feel alive and now I’m really bold. And yeah, I could go out there and ...carry on my activism with so much confidence...”

- Debbie, Malawi

“The way the facilitators or the speakers spoke just broadened my knowledge and gave me more understanding of how I can facilitate different when I am with my girls in workshops. So that is what I’ve been trying to do, and it’s working well. Because I found myself in much longer conversations, or deeper discussions. And also the girls are ...engaging in many ways. Because usually, ... the same girls always speak... So it’s not only the girls that always speak, it’s practically my whole group that is always speaking now. And that’s the thing that makes me so happy because it also gives me insight. It shows me that I really learned something. And now I’m trying to implement it, and it’s actually working, so there’s a positive outcome.”

- Lee-Anne, South Africa

“The second session was sexual reproductive health and rights. I really love that session, because as an activist I focus my activism on sexual and reproductive health and rights. And that session was really informative. [It covered] a lot of information that I was unaware of that had happened during 2020, 2021 and also

early 2022. I got the recent stats, I actually had to go out there and ask them to provide the slides. Because it was so informative. You see all these things that have been happening, ... some of the things I didn't even know. And I'm like 'oh, wow'. So it was really, really helpful for me. And I could use this information now to go about with my own personal activism.”

- Debbie, Malawi

“There is nothing wrong with a young person seeking knowledge about sex. Young people deserve to receive open, frank and non-judgmental information about sex and sexualities. Young people need to be taught about their bodies and how powerful and beautiful they are, but they are rarely told this.

I know this from my own childhood, and it was a privilege to be in Sierra Leone serving as an “Auntie” to young girls from across the continent, sharing with them what I have learnt about the beautiful possibilities that our bodies hold when they are truly our own; that your body first and foremost belongs to you; that you deserve to feel safe in your skin; that no act of sex should feel painful; that sex with yourself is okay and the safest way to experience pleasure; that no adult should have sex with a child. Indeed, that is not sex but rape. That pain is a sign that something is wrong in your body and should not be tolerated because you are a girl or a young woman”

- Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, [in this Mail & Guardian article](#)

Sisterhood (and being our sister’s keeper)

Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Founding Director of Resource Center for Women and Girls in Kenya, facilitated a session with the girls about sisterhood and the power it

provides to fuel movements. Zeedah encouraged the girls to establish connections with one another. She emphasised the importance of women and girls coming together to build each other's awareness and solidarity. This fuelled rich discussions between the girls, one of which considered experiences of intergenerational solidarity and leadership and the sometimes harmful relationships that emerge between women and girls in philanthropic spaces.

Girls charted their experiences of feeling let down by women in positions of power in philanthropy. At the same time, they explored the conditions in which women in those positions have to operate - navigating male- and white-dominated spaces whilst also continuing to hold personal, domestic and caring responsibilities. Another discussion highlighted the importance of being strategic when it comes to our activism, and thinking critically about the narratives that patriarchy has fed us surrounding other women and girls.

“We have to overcome what we’ve been conditioned to believe about other women... it’s not in our interest. We are dangerous, if they knew how dangerous young women were, you would all be locked up. We can be friends, we must be friends. You have to have a pro-women attitude - we are so hard on each other, so judgemental. We have to practice sisterhood”

- Zeedah

“I think the session of sisterhood because Zeedah ...really talks a lot about feminism and activism... I really remember a sentence she said that whenever we are doing something, we need to give ... the work that we are doing... a name and for

example, for us that name is activism... that name is feminism, for example... because she talks a lot about feminism and activism. And it really like makes us think a lot about what feminism really means for us and what activism means for us. 'Are we really activist?'... So yeah, I think that that session [had me] thinking about myself, if really like the meaning that I was having about feminism, it's still the same after it"

- Oumaima

What does feminism mean to you?

During our interviews with the girls, we thought it was important to engage them on their understandings of feminism and what it means to them. The word "feminism" holds different meanings for different people, something that is often overlooked in our collective struggle for equality. Whilst we may have similar goals, the reasons that inform these goals may vary from person to person, depending on our individual experiences and circumstances. This is why we take an intersectional approach to feminist struggles.

At the same time, there is often a misconception that girls do not know or understand feminism. As we can see in the following quotes, this is simply not the case. Girls are thinking critically about what feminism means to them, and how they live feminist lives and do feminist work every day. It is important that organisations who work with girls hold space for and acknowledge these individual perspectives, and the differing ways in which girls are engaging with feminisms in their everyday lives.

“... feminism is all about advocating for equal rights for both men and women, irrespective of the race, irrespective of your religion, irrespective of your gender or your sex - we should all have equal rights, and we should have rights to access facilities...”

- Cheche, Nigeria

“So when I think of feminism, I think of equality of the sexes, right? So advocating for women's rights, like Cheche said, and also like the ability to make decisions about when, or how or with whom to conduct their sexual life, you know? So no one should tell you, as a woman ‘no’ this, or ‘you can’t’ that... So it's basically also like... to stand up for women's rights. I think it's the same as advocating for women's rights. The first word that pops to mind when I think of feminism is equality to me.”

- Lee-Anne, South Africa

“I consider myself as a very intersectional feminist. I don't consider myself as a feminist feminist. Reason why is, being an intersectional feminist, I could advocate for ...so many types of communities: women that are... that are limited, women that are not limited; women that are educated, women that are not educated, and women that have different types of body types. Also, women that have different types of beliefs in everything. And being a feminist for me is just a way of how you learn things, and also perceive things and then go out there and actually advocate so that you make everybody feel comfortable. That for me is feminism because once you are a feminist, you're able to learn something, understand that something and also go out there and tell others, ‘okay, this is what I've learned’. And I think that we need to really work together to make this a comfortable space for everybody. Because if

you're like limiting yourself, then you're not being fair. So yeah, basically, that's, that's what feminist means to me.”

- Debbie, Malawi

“... After the conference, I realised that feminism for me is being my sister's keeper, and being the keeper of people who attend from me something, you know. So, also... defending and raising awareness about many topics that ...we have different points of view about... [F]or example, even in my country, is something that a lot of girls suffer from, you know. So I think that the terms of feminism [means] a fighter for the rights and. value that the other girls or the other people in general, weight for us... I believe that when I have a position, ... I can make my voice clear and heard by many people.”

- Oumaima, Morocco

Planning a Successful Summit for Girls:

- Location, location, location: Bringing together over 50 girls, along with chaperones, interpreters, facilitators and members of the organising team needs a large, accessible and functioning venue! Things such as working toilets, appropriate outdoor and rest spaces, air conditioning, electricity, and large enough spaces for plenary sessions are key considerations. Furthermore, it's incredibly important to be aware of any access needs your guests may have prior to choosing a venue.
- Wellbeing: Bringing people together from across the African continent means that a lot of participants will arrive exhausted, jet-lagged and in need of rest

after their journeys. People may not only have travelled on multiple flights, but for hours from their homes to the closest airport. Additional time for rest prior to starting the work is essential and should be accounted for when planning. Similarly, unexpected illness should also be a consideration. In particular, plan for things like food poisoning, stomach upsets (from travelling, flying for the first time, eating unfamiliar food, nerves etc.), headaches and malaria. Providing a dignity pack to all participants at the start of the summit meant that they had items such as sanitary towels if they needed them, but additional sanitary towels and condoms were placed in the bathrooms for anyone to take at any time.

- Chaperones: Many girls travelled to the event with chaperones which was great, as it meant they had someone to accompany them on their journeys. When the girls arrived and joined the Summit, the chaperones had free time to spare, which was something we did not consider. Thinking creatively about how to engage the chaperones, and ensuring there are enough staff members to do so, is definitely something on the agenda for next time!
- Logistics: Coordinating travel and arranging appropriate accommodation for so many people takes months! Our team members did an excellent job at coordinating this process but one learning was that planning far in advance is essential. In addition, when everyone is together, local transport needs to be arranged to travel to venues. One great thing about the venue we chose was that it was at the hotel where the girls were staying, meaning they could walk to the Summit on the day from their rooms. Don't forget the catering! Bringing

so many different people together means catering to varying dietary requirements.

- Language: Not only is it imperative that interpreters are provided for those who speak languages other than the one or ones sessions are being hosted in, but it is necessary that the interpreters you choose have experience with working with the relevant communities you are engaging, and that they are an appropriate fit when holding discussions on topics such as sex and pleasure.

What will we do differently or better next time?

If only we had one more day, time for one more question, one more session, and another, and another after that. The overarching feedback from the team pointed to the need for future Girls' Summits to be longer, with more time for the girls to rest, explore their surroundings, showcase their talents to one another, and lead their own sessions. Time never seems to be on our side, but we must find a way to carve out more space, more minutes to engage for longer, take that extra breath (or two), play that game between sessions, and keep the floor open for several more 'one last' questions.

Considering the rarity of these spaces, the possibilities they expose, the connections they catalyse, the laughter, joy, community, vibrancy, mutual recognition, and empowerment - we must find the time. We must make the space. And the girls should take the floor - more girls, from more African countries, with the time they need to say what they want to say in ways that are meaningful and useful for them.

A Girls Manifesto, written together at the Girls' Summit

We are girls from across 41 countries who have gathered here in Freetown on the eve of the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights. We have shared space, shared stories, we have learnt from each other and from the women who walk with us. We have felt our shared power in this space. We have learnt that our struggles are the same struggles, even within our differences.

We have named that sisterhood is a coalition of Black girls, of African girls. For I am my sister's keeper. For my sisters and I we come first. We are learning together to name that loudly. When we are together, we can learn, connect and create friendships that will stretch across the Continent even after this conference.

We want to be together more, we need spaces like this. We are too separated from each other, too alone in our individual struggles. Moments like this are not often enough. We need them to make it through all what we must navigate as girls. We need these conversations. We need to be able to ask questions. To answer each other. To answer ourselves with love and grace and care. To say sorry to our bodies.

In this space we have sat together as girls and with the women who walk beside us and we have named for each other that our bodies are deeply our own. That our bodies are beautiful and powerful. That we have the right to make all the choices for our bodies and our lives. That we have all the rights to pleasure that the world has to offer us. That if our bodies were a Utopia we would blossom, open, that we would always know how beautiful we are. That no would mean no, and yes would mean yes, and no-one anywhere would be able to take this away from us.

The world needs to hear this. That we deserve to be free and we deserve to be heard.

This is our offering, together, to all of you in this room. A reminder. An invitation. To stand with us. We need more. We need more platforms like this. We need you to trust us. To trust us with the money we need to do this work because we are already doing the work. Look at us. So powerful, even without you, imagine how powerful if we are all together?

Thank you.

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