Missed Opportunities and False Binaries:

South feminist analysis from UN multilateral processes

Published in 2023
Credits:

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The YP Foundation (India).

We would like to thank all Feminist Community of Care
(FemCom) participants and RESURJ members and
Secretariat.

Suggested citation:
Valenciano, L., Abuelsoud, N., Perera, S., Cabello,
Opportunities and False Binaries: South feminist
analysis from UN multilateral processes. https://resurj.
org/resource/csw-cpd-2023-south-feminist-analysis/
Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice (RESURJ)
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We strongly believe younger South feminists should be the leading voices in multilateral spaces such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD). Be it through their country delegations, UN corridors lobbying, factsheets drafting, or evidence-based interventions that can challenge and disrupt mundane geopolitics.

While intergovernmental platforms are going through grave trying times, broadly inspected for efficiency by different stakeholders, including feminists, we keep going back and strategizing and organizing around them every year. One of our reasons is the outcomes of those spaces, such as the Agreed Conclusions from each CSW, which contribute to the international standards and norm setting around women’s human rights, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Alongside treaties such as CEDAW, declarations and programs of action of world conferences such as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) and the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) as well as regional instruments and development frameworks like the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, we see the importance of ensuring that
progressive language and commitments are included in Agreed Conclusions and Outcome documents. We also want to ensure that our demands for the full realization of SRHR take into account the economic and environmental contexts we come from, so that our demands are strongly rooted in our realities rather than abstract and siloed ideas.

We also aim to ensure that our demands for sexual and reproductive justice do not replicate and reinforce the inequalities, violence, and injustices we are fighting against. This year online gender-based violence was a key topic of discussion under the priority theme of CSW67 and through our contributions we aimed to encourage feminist activists to question the effectiveness of criminal justice as a response to violence and how we can imagine, demand, resource, and sustain more comprehensive responses and approaches. We also attempted to broaden how we understand online GBV by locating it in relation to freedom of expression, pleasure and bodily autonomy.

This year’s sessions of CSW and CPD were particularly strategic for RESURJ, as comprehensive sexuality education is one of our key priorities (see 4, 5 and 6 in RESURJ 13-point Action Agenda to see our demands), together with universal access to quality education as quintessential to progressive and sustainable development for our countries in the Global South.
The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), convening under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. This year was the 67th session of CSW (CSW67), held from 6 to 17 March, 2023 in New York. The Commission consists of 45 member states at any given time (13 from Africa, 11 from Asia, 9 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 4 from Eastern Europe, and 8 from Western Europe and others).

Every year, the Commission discusses a priority theme that results in an outcome document which contains the agreements reached by Member States, known as Agreed Conclusions. Additionally there is a review theme that comes from the Agreed Conclusions from the session held five years ago; to be reviewed and built on. The themes for CSW67 were:

- Priority theme: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls
Review theme: Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls (agreed conclusions of the sixty-second session)

While the focus on technology in the priority theme was encouraging, it was noted by feminists from the outset that the framing was not based on rights and freedoms and instead development-centric. Feminists, including RESURJ and our allies, tried to expand this framing through knowledge resources, language advocacy and parallel events. As noted by the Women’s Rights Caucus (WRC), the Agreed Conclusions that culminated from CSW67 showed progress on some issues including the centrality of human rights when it comes to technology, the role of digital platforms in women’s participation in public life and the recognition of the element of consent when it comes to online gender-based violence. However, critical language, and accompanying political positions, on sexual rights, bodily autonomy, comprehensive sexuality education, and the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people were left out of the Agreed Conclusions and were constantly shut down and narrowed down in the intergovernmental negotiations that preceded the Agreed Conclusions.

We also observed resistance from some member states about acknowledging the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) in the Agreed Conclusions, based on the argument that GEF undermines state sovereignty by including the private sector as a stakeholder. Given the amount of resources and political capital spent on GEF by UN Women, it is important that we pay attention to these dynamics without simply dismissing them as positions taken by “regressive” member states to block consensus on Agreed Conclusions. Feminists have long been criticizing the corporate capture of the UN and the undue focus on private financing to achieve gender equality and sustainable development and it is important that we sit with these complexities and faultlines.

Such political positions are quite predictable as they have become engraved into geographical and political blocs year after year. Pushing for new hopeful language in these documents is insurmountable. Yet there are ways for us, as feminists, to influence and alter these platforms. We can push for shuffling categorization of issues in a way that is more holistic, for example, technology can no longer be negotiated as a standalone theme.
Instead of incorporating technology in each priority theme; when we are negotiating climate, poverty, health etc.

Despite the rigidity of its geopolitics, CSW67 harvested a couple of wins. The Agreed Conclusion acknowledged the role technology plays in women’s participation in public life. Moreover, it framed and included “consent” in relation to online gender based violence, without focusing solely on harm. CSW67 Agreed Conclusion touches on consent in the preambular paragraph 39:

“The Commission recognizes that, despite the opportunities, there is a need to address challenges associated with the misuse of new and emerging digital technologies which can be designed and/or used to incite violence, hatred, discrimination and hostility, inter alia, racism, xenophobia, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of women and girls. The Commission expresses concern that women, and particularly girls, often do not and/or cannot provide their free, explicit and informed consent to the collection, processing, use and storage of their personal data or to the reuse, sale or multiple resale of their personal data, as the collection, processing, use, storage and sharing of personal data, including sensitive data, have increased significantly in the digital age.”

In the CSW67 Asia Pacific regional consultation, it was noted by our ally from Body and Data, Kabita Rai, that the entire conversation was just limited to the assumption that everyone “loves the internet and will benefit at all levels with no speculation of other situations where people who do not wish to be in the digital space are accommodated and not negatively impacted”.

The Commission on Population and Development (CPD) is the official intergovernmental space to monitor and review the implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action (PoA). The 56th session membership was composed of (12 African states, 11 Asia and Pacific states, 9 Latin American states, 5 Eastern European states, and 10 Western European and other states).

The theme of this year was Population, Education, and Sustainable Development. The negotiations started weeks before the beginning of the session on April 10 and continued until its last day, on April 14.

The theme was particularly important given that challenges in accessing quality education were multiplied because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to ongoing economic, environmental and climate crises, conflict, border restrictions, and increasing influence of anti-gender and anti-rights movements on access to information and freedom of expression. Education, as a main theme in CPD56, was particularly relevant for activists and CSOs working in the context of the Global South because of the persisting and
widening gap in access to education in our countries. As the pandemic and lockdowns brought forward a different set of difficulties for millions of adolescents and families in the shift to online schooling in places where financial means and technological infrastructure were absent to facilitate such an abrupt transition. On the other hand, schooling took place at homes wherever caregivers or parents had the luxury of time to accompany children through it. In many households, adding one more layer to the unpaid care work, most often performed by women. We will need more studies and time to determine all impacts of the pandemic on this generation of children, adolescents and young people. Even before COVID-19, many young people and adolescents, particularly girls, have been facing barriers accessing formal education. Not to mention access to quality education that is gender transformative, context-driven, includes comprehensive sexuality education in the curricula, and can actually serve as a tool for people to meet their needs and prioritize their wellbeing.

These barriers, as we know, are structural and are linked to the lack of budgets, outdated and colonial visions of education as a panacea to address all problems and to “civilize” people, as well as the lack of integral public policies that address other basic needs of people. Weakened quality of education poses a persistent challenge to the future of generations in the Global South, primarily due to the lack of political will, mismanagement of public financial resources, deprioritization and crippling foreign debt orchestrated by international financial institutions, and austerity measures, lack of social protection and privatization of essential services and public goods that have a direct impact on the right to education. This highlights the importance of the participation of south-based activists and organizations to bring about our concerns, our points of view, and what we envision as transformation that can actually work for our contexts.

At CPD56, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) was one of the main priorities for a number of Member States as well as the civil society organizing group annexed to the space. We observed that the prioritization of CSE superseded other issues of equal importance, such as access to education in general and its quality in particular. The lack of a broader view on education was a lost opportunity for commitments to increase financing and advance policies that could benefit
Weakened quality of education poses a persistent challenge to the future of generations in the Global South, primarily due to the lack of political will, mismanagement of public financial resources, deprioritization and crippling foreign debt orchestrated by international financial institutions, and austerity measures, lack of social protection and privatization of essential services and public goods that have a direct impact on the right to education.

children and youth and their access to a dignified education system that honors critical thinking and creativity. The negotiations could have also prioritized access to technology and the internet as a public good, in addition to ensuring safe and secure connectivity for all. Furthermore, CPD56 should have been a space to build on the commitments and rhetoric from the 2022 UN Transforming Education Summit and address some critical gaps.

Instead, Member States’ representatives waged a polarizing war that undermined the collective effort to get a consensus at this session after failing to do so in a number of CPD sessions in the last few years, barring 2022. CPD56 was particularly important as it sits in the lead-up to the 30th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+30) in 2024. It is critical that we continue to build on the relentless feminist mobilizations during the Cairo conference in 1994 in which population policies shifted from population control rhetoric and measures, to people centered policies. ICPD also achieved historical milestones that paved the road for our collective sexual and reproductive health and rights wins in the decades that followed.

Geopolitical back and forth largely influenced the outcomes of CPD56, or none thereof. The room was divided to two sides:

1. Member States who have been challenging the use of agreed language on sexual and reproductive health and
reproductive rights and challenging proposed language on comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sexual diversity based on the argument that it would undermine the previous agreed language.

2. Member States championing CSE as non-negotiable language to be included in the consensus document refraining from supporting efforts to come to an agreement around other issues such as financing for education and strengthening educational institutions and infrastructure.

In addition to CPD’s geopolitics as we know them, this year we witnessed (un)expected positions from member states that are usually not progressive on sexuality and gender. All of a sudden countries like Ukraine were adamant about the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education, presumably not reflective of a sudden change in their local policies but to undermine all points made by Russia.

As it usually goes, the positions of some countries, such as Iran, Russia, and Egypt that oppose the inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights in the document are handy for trade-offs. At the same time, these states hold this position to reclaim their autonomy as an expression of sovereignty, which for the most part is quite ideological. It is also worth noting that it is quite ideological too for “like-minded” or “group of friends” countries, including the EU and the UK, to continuously hold an apathetic position on financing health, canceling debts, and being accountable for the climate crises. This repeated scene of vouching who is “progressive” and who is “opposition” only feeds into authoritarianism and accumulated wealth and further exploit too many geographies in the Global South. This is why it is so important to support the moveable middles such as Brazil; those that have also been affected and exploited, or still are, such as Mexico, Colombia, and South Africa and also care about social justice issues and peoples’ well-being.

Once again, what is progressive and rights-centered was taken at face value and reduced to CSE as the only marker of upholding people’s rights in this space under this theme. This reductive position was not just advanced by Northern countries, but also by the majority of feminists and SRHR CSOs organizing around CPD56. Proposals to honor and
respect national sovereignty, as put forward by many state representatives, were treated as a regressive caveat and not as part of the bigger ask of transformative development and balanced economic interdependence. A very polarized and narrow worldview of countries who are “progressive” or “opposition” that reinforces the dichotomy of North versus South only on the basis of reproductive and sexual rights.

It was disheartening to see education as something Member States could not commit to in CPD56, despite attempts by the Chair to secure a consensus between Member States on the priority theme. Certainly comprehensive sexuality education is key to achieving gender equality, maternal and parental health goals, and even to reduce gendered and other types of discrimination at large. “CSE or nothing” is a position that further feeds the polarization already in place, because of the massive political shifts we are witnessing. As was mentioned in one of our FemCom reflections, many students have no desks or basic amenities where they live, guaranteeing educational infrastructure would improve their living conditions by many folds. This year we could have come to a middle ground where commitments toward universal access to quality education could have been made. But Member States and civil society decided to polarize and we ended up with no commitments at all. Who will benefit from that? Not the Global South.

It is naive to think that government representatives will actually study and represent the interests of people when they posture in multilateral spaces, or that they will follow through on implementation. Especially those from Permanent Missions are always playing a bigger board game. It is disempowering that we as CSOs representatives and feminists deliberately take up cheerleader roles to pro-SRHR states regardless of their regressive positions on other similarly important matters in people’s lives such as climate justice, debt and economic justice, migration, etc. When civil society plays a role in pushing for extremes, we become complicit in not listening to those who need to reclaim their autonomy over oppressive structures and in requesting those in the middle to become accomplices with the oppressors.

1 Permanent Missions organize and coordinate their Member States participation in the work of the United Nations (source: https://www.ungeneva.org/en/permanent-missions#:~:text=Permanent%20missions%20were%20established%20in%20differing%20constitutional%20and%20social%20systems.)
Furthermore, our participation during this year’s CPD session was key due to the growing criticism of the Commission over the past few years. Although CPD has formulated key conclusions over the years, the fact that disagreement and lack of consensus have been present in several consecutive sessions in recent years is a signal of its flawed structure and lack of political weight.

In the Latin American and Caribbean contexts, the Regional Conference on Population and Development, CPD’s regional mechanism, reached the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development in 2013. This agreement is meaningful not only because it was essential for the advancement of our rights in the context of the creation of the 2030 Agenda, but also as spelled out in its name, a consensus. Its relevance also comes from being the first regionally agreed outcome document that highlights the importance of recognizing people’s specific needs according to their context, such as the specific needs of children, adolescents and youth, migrants, the elderly, indigenous, and Afro-descendant people. It also drove the regional efforts to focus on the promotion and vigilance of human rights, the elimination of structural social, economic, and gender inequalities, and the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. Highlighting also the commitment to review existing laws on abortion to liberalize them in order to reduce unsafe abortions. Reviews of the advancement of the Montevideo Consensus according to the official data of ECLAC in its 10th anniversary is published here.

To these ends, we stress that even though the Commission on Population and Development as a mechanism is in fact improvable, it has brought about important discussions and advancements that allow us to demand real-life changes that bring us closer to achieving sexual and reproductive justice across regions. This is why we must be strategic and use these mechanisms to advance our agendas, and to be vocal about what we need in our specific contexts, and not let the Global North define all agendas.
Feminist organizing at the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Population and Development

RESURJ worked closely with our accomplices and allies during CSW67 and CPD56 sessions, and strategized around education, the overlapping priority in the priority themes of the two sessions. To support and build community for newcomers to these spaces and younger South feminists, as usual we provided accompaniment throughout the processes and co-built our political analysis. We honored our customary activities at the margins of CSW67 and CPD56, and co-hosted Feminist Community of Care (FemCom, previously known as The Space) to meet and connect with feminists and newcomers from the Global South to these spaces. FemCom is a space where we carry out collective care practices, deepen our collective analysis, articulate what works for us and what makes us fidget. A feminist praxis that we put together along with our close accomplice DIVA for Equality in Fiji.

Our ways of accompanying each other include: check-ins, group communication threads to keep each other company, tips and tricks on navigating New York and the UN, reflections on the methods of work, collective reflections on plenary and expert sessions as well as the draft document and negotiations taking place, and showing up to each other’s events and interventions in solidarity. At FemComs, we are intentional about decompressing, connecting, and speaking in our tongues over food and upbeat music. We also contextualize our political asks by sharing our work and regional and national priorities pertaining to the main theme, and how intergovernmental advocacy works (or not) for us.
Group photos from our Feminist Community of Care (FemCom) at CSW and CPD
More formally, there are two main civil society organizing spaces annexed to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Commission on Population and Development (CPD); the Women’s Rights Caucus (WRC) and the International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition (ISRRC), respectively.

There has been a gradual and positive change over the years in the WRC, a coalition of more than 200 organizations where feminists and women’s rights activists collectively organize and advocate around CSW. However, it is still designed as a space that assumes every organization is equally placed to engage in these processes, regardless of the timezone, organizational allocation of time, and human and financial resources; making the threshold for meaningful engagement quite high. It was heartening also to note this year the revival of the CSW Young Feminist Caucus and the leadership of young feminists from the Global South in its organizing.

The ISSRC is an alliance of organizations that work together to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) globally. It advocates for comprehensive access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, safe abortion, maternal health care, and prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections. Although the Coalition intends to reach agreements that will have a global impact, by adhering to UN methods of work; including tight deadlines for mark-ups and language recommendations. This organization format does not respond to the reality of Global South activists, organizations, or resources. Much of the work is done in person, days if not weeks prior to the arrival of Global South activists in New York and in time zones that do not match our own. The pace of the work being done at the UN limits how engaged we get to be during this process since our organizations rarely have the capacity to only focus on UN processes.

The intensity of CSW and CPD on feminist organizing predates this year’s sessions. A lot of methods of work of the UN were affected by the hybrid modality of participation since the pandemic. We see the value of maintaining this mode of participation, based on the countless failed attempts of activists to take part in these spaces due to visa rejections, lack of financial resources, and lack of capacity building opportunities to strengthen the fluency of UN mechanisms.
and processes. We are challenged by Member States’ increased aversion to collaborating and working with civil society organizations, as they have gotten used to moving documents forward independently since 2020. Many of us have not got a chance to repose and recuperate from the duality of continuing business as usual as the world struggles with a global health crisis. Many of us are stretched thin to continue working at grassroots while engaging with global policymaking while running on scarce funding.

It is also worth noting that these sessions undermined previously agreed consensus positions among Member States. Watered-down language and surface level take on technology at CSW67, and no consensus on the theme of *Population, Education, and Sustainable Development* at CPD56. Such challenges impede our efforts to push for more progressive politics on bodily autonomy, and by extension holding our governments accountable to their application.

More broadly, and beyond the negotiations among Member States during the CPD, geopolitics also influenced how “progressive” countries and regional blocs impacted feminist organizing. The formal and informal debates around the ISSCR meetings, and more importantly, the people who were leading these dialogues, made evident the existence of a power imbalance between donor countries, less wealthy states, civil society representatives from INGOs or North/Western countries, and civil society representatives from the Global South. We noted similar dynamics in our political analysis from CSW last year too.

Allocation and availability of resources for civil society, priority for the participation of CSO representatives, who are these participants, and the dominant conversations revealed the power dynamics in place. There was a lot of politics at play at CPD instead of a real commitment to advance the rights of people. These internal struggles could also be mirroring the same dynamics carried on by member states during their political negotiations.
Our political asks from:

Member States

- UN Second Committee and Third Committee processes of improving Methods of Work and practices have to take into account that currently intergovernmental negotiations are designed and imagined as something only those in the Global North and/or with enough resources to have people assigned to just UN advocacy can engage in. There is no scope for feminists in the Global South to engage, it is designed without us and to exclude us.
- Generation Equality Forum financial commitments need to go to feminist movements and not limit resources to multilateral and bilateral agencies alone.
- The UN is not a safe place for activists. Threats from governments, threats from anti-rights groups and opposition, lack of access, etc. And simply streaming or offering hybrid modalities will not fix these challenges.
- Stop posturing with polarized positions, thus blocking possibilities for negotiated outcomes of these processes that we put our time and resources into.

WRC and ISRRC

- Plug into UN reform advocacy and discussions, especially in between sessions of CSW and CPD, to improve Methods of Work of ECOSOC commissions.
- Post-CSW and post-CPD virtual gatherings are essential for collective reflections on learnt lessons and assessments of utilized strategies; to identify actionable changes and who is located strategically to take them forward.
- More transparency on how co-conveners are selected, how they practice accountability to the movements, etc.
- Mentorship from feminist organizing spaces to establish and activate young feminist collective spaces formally as well as informally, including but not limited to mentorship and financial support to youth organizing.
UN Women

- Partnerships such as the Blackrock fiasco make it hard to build trust with UN Women, and movements end up using our limited energies and resources on reactive strategies and lose the space and momentum for constructive proactive discussions.
- New York is now costlier than it has ever been and there is a serious need for conversations on how this affects meaningful civil society participation. Seriously consider holding both convenings in more accessible locations.
- Revive UN Women’s role in ensuring that state legal obligations on gender equality under the UN Charter and treaty bodies are not disconnected and undermined in ECOSOC processes.
- Practice multilingualism in UN Women’s work and meetings to foster inclusivity and ensure accessibility to diverse linguistic communities.

Donors

- Stop enabling the maintenance of status quo in UN multilateral processes.
- As shared in our analysis above, South-North dynamics are complex and cannot be reduced to binaries, please pay attention.
- Generation Equality Forum financial commitments need to go to feminist movements and not limit resources to multilateral and bilateral agencies alone.
- Support us like you want us to win. Especially the meaningful in-person participation of young people who are structurally excluded, including those from marginalized castes, those who are disabled, those who are oppressed on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, etc. in UN multilateral processes.
- Engage with communities and movements to understand our priorities.
Feminists:

- Encourage the establishment of intergenerational and cross-geographical networks and collectives to foster mentorship for young people and amplify their voices, to better engage them in UN processes like the CSW and CPD.
- Queer the spaces! Promoting inclusivity based on participation and representation of our movements in policy spaces by inviting gender diverse, non-binary, and trans people, and historically marginalized and excluded people, and employing strategies from a queer-feminist perspective to ensure their meaningful participation.
- Working with youth representatives and youth delegates in CSW and CPD, and ensuring their active participation in the markups.