

# WE EXIST IN REAL LIFE, NOT ONLY ON PAPER!

REFLECTIONS ON THE XVI CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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# CREDITS

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# INTRODUCTION

**From August 12th to 15th, 2025, RESURJ members and allies convened in Mexico to attend the XVI Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean.** This regional meeting aimed to discuss *political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental transformations as a means of advancing care societies and gender equality.*

This space, like many other UN multilateral convenings, followed the trend of exclusionary practices, shrinking civic space and dialogues that were largely disconnected from the lived realities of the communities that speakers aimed to represent. This is why we wanted to take some time to reflect on the role of civil society in these spaces and how there is a serious need to rethink the outcomes. It is not enough for the Conference to change its name<sup>1</sup> to be more inclusive: If we hope to create a feminist future rooted in justice, equity, and care, we must reform our multilateral processes and transform the very way that we approach convenings of this nature.

In this reflection, RESURJitas and allies critically reflect on the challenges experienced at the XVI Regional Conference on Women and offer solutions for a collective way forward, naming some of the obstacles to invite us all to question how we can continue to learn and challenge the way feminists show up in multilateral spaces in general.

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<sup>1</sup> In Spanish, the Conference 's name has, since its inception, been Conferencia Regional sobre la Mujer de América Latina y el Caribe. Part of the outcome from the XVI Conference was a name change from woman (Mujer) to women (Mujeres). In 2028, the conference will be held in Colombia under the name Conferencia Regional sobre las Mujeres de América Latina y el Caribe.

# ON THE CHALLENGE TO PARTICIPATE IN A SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Sara Martínez and Oriana López Uribe, México

With constant and growing barriers, feminists find it harder to meaningfully engage and attend multilateral spaces. Although this might seem like the unintended result of a variety of factors and external forces, our participation becomes more and more difficult because of deliberate barriers set by governments and the actual institutions that are meant to sustain the multilateral landscape as an open, transparent, democratic space with the participation of diverse actors. This year, the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean was not the exception.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), UN Women, and the Mexican Government excused themselves, saying that it was a symbolic political decision to host the event at the Tlatelolco historical site since it was the same venue of the first World Conference on Women 50 years ago. The result: a very limited number of accreditations for civil society to the conference, multiple venues because the space was not big enough, and a scattered feminist movement with no place to strategize. This was not a logistical issue; this was clearly a deliberate maneuvering tactic to reduce civic space, literally and rhetorically. Not only did this decision limit our numbers, but it also meant chaotic agendas, clashing meetings, and ultimately, a less unified civil society, fewer spaces to gather and plan, and, most importantly, fewer eyes on the negotiation happening across the street from the main room.

Logistical barriers have long been tactics to intentionally reduce our chances of participating. Thus, institutions contribute to the exclusion of civil society from decision-making, but disguise it and keep smiling at us, even calling us partners, while we can see how they would do all they can to keep our numbers low and our ratio of influence as narrow as possible, contradicting the very same principles of democracy: wide and diverse participation and transparency.

A healthy and robust civic space is crucial for democracy. The meaningful participation of civil society in decision-making processes, access to information for monitoring, and accountability mechanisms, strengthen the effectiveness of public policies and create co-ownership of communities and organizations, which allows trust to be built and kept. Open governance models make democracies transformative because policies do not depend on temporary governments or passing officials. Instead, they enable the implementation of long-term strategies that address structural disparities and allow democracies to bring about profound social transformation.

When civic space shrinks, elites get to act and make decisions only from their narrow vision and taking into account only their own interests, of course, they will then, 'magically' keep the power, leaving minorities and vulnerable groups behind. This is a calculated tactic, and its goal is to perpetuate the status quo, which uplifts systems of oppression and therefore drives societies to deepen inequalities, disparities, and injustices on all fronts.

Making us jump through hoops is a tactic used by multilateral elites to tire feminists out. It is intended to make our participation hang by a thread, to foster competition among ourselves, and distract us from actually safeguarding Human Rights and getting substantial commitments.

In a way, we are so used to this obstacle race that we have learned to navigate it; they just keep adding tricks and traps. But we must stop doing business as usual and speak up, disrupt, and challenge it. Civic space will keep shrinking, with securitization, logistical, and economic reasons given. We must not fall for or believe in those arguments. We know that when civic space shrinks, power gets concentrated in the few; elites who get to keep the power, leaving minorities and vulnerable groups behind.

Feminists should know that having us competing for less than we deserve is a tactic, so we feel accomplished by just being let in and settle for minimal concessions. We need to break the pattern; we need to keep asking for the whole pie. We must organize together, be loud, and be bolder to open up more spaces for all of us.



# ON THE CHALLENGE TO BECOME VISIBLE AND OVERCOME EXCLUSION

Sapphire Alexander, Trinidad and Tobago

Despite boasting a significant rate of participation from Caribbean representatives, their voices remained few and far between at the 16th Regional Conference on Women in Latin America.

Caribbean realities were not just missing from the general discussion, but data from Caribbean countries was significantly limited within the relaunched [Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean](#) when compared to our counterparts from Latin America.

As Caribbean ecofeminist Ayesha Constable shared in her address, the lack of comprehensive and gender disaggregated data in the region can serve to invisibilise the nuanced challenges faced by feminists in the Caribbean. This creates a scenario where our inequality is hidden, allowing it to appear as though we have achieved gender equality when this is far from the case.

There is an often-held but incorrect assumption that the socio-political landscape of Latin America and the Caribbean is similar. This misconception, rooted in colonialism, does little to address the geographical, historical, cultural and linguistic barriers that define these two regions. This misconception persists in multilateral spaces, resulting in the continued sidelining of the Caribbean within general discourse.

The scarcity of Caribbean feminists in multilateral spaces means that Caribbean activists are often required to represent not just the realities of their nations, but those of the entire region, thus contributing to the centralisation of voices and tokenisation of the few activists that make it to these spaces.

Even though we were few and far between, Caribbean representatives at the XVI regional Conference shared strong messages around the theme of care. Caribbean academics like Rhoda Reddock denounced the loss of state-supported care systems and noted the disproportionate burden placed on civil society to provide care services despite shrinking fiscal space to do so. Government representatives discussed the need to shift social norms related to care and the equitable gendered division of care tasks. Climate and climate finance were another key area for Caribbean civil society and governments, with many outlining the link between care for persons and the planet.

As we expand the conversation around care, what it means for us to create caring societies, economies and communities, we must ask the question: Who cares for Caribbean Feminists? It's only through our analysis of this question that we may bring an end to the uncaring dynamics of exclusion, tokenisation and invisibilization that we see far too often in these multilateral spaces.

# ON THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZING BEYOND (AND DISPUTE) MULTILATERAL SPACES

Laura Valenciano, Costa Rica

Reducing feminist organizing to spaces validated only by institutional structures, such as regional United Nations offices, risks diminishing the relevance and vitality of grassroots movements, which are often the true engines of change. When legitimacy is measured solely by access to these formal arenas, local marginalized and underfunded groups are left struggling against barriers they were never meant to overcome alone.

The Regional Conference on Women from Latin America and the Caribbean is no exception: we must ensure that the space does not collapse into negotiations decided before we arrive and carried out behind closed doors once we are gathered in the same city. This last event proved the point all too clearly, as we were once again excluded from most delegations and reduced to reading our declaration in a room where those who most needed to listen were granted the possibility not to. This dynamic not only sidelines essential voices but also weakens the collective strength of feminist struggles.

It is therefore our responsibility to use whatever power and privilege we hold to open doors for others, to offer stepping stones rather than gatekeeping, to mobilize in ways that include rather than exclude and to think of dynamics that can foster more inclusion, more radical critical thinking and less protocolary gestures that only legitimize elites.

Perhaps it is within ourselves that we must begin to shake things up - by placing real value, energy, and resources into our own movements. This is a call to reflect on how we, as feminists, are showing up in advocacy spaces - especially regional ones, where we are often closer to the contexts, the people, and the movements that need to be heard.

# ON THE CHALLENGE

## TO CONNECT MULTILATERALISM TO ON THE GROUND REALITIES

Priscilla Purtschert, Ecuador

Participating in the regional conference was, in many ways, a privilege. It's costly to travel, to navigate the administrative and logistical challenges, to take some days off from our daily activities, and the list goes on... Only a few of us make it, and that alone shapes the kind of conversations that can take place.

Even then, this privilege doesn't guarantee that our voices will be heard or taken into consideration. Sitting in the conference room, listening to beautiful paragraphs about care, change, and equity, I couldn't help but feel a disconnection. So much of what is said feels like it lives only on paper: abstract and far from the realities of our territories. Ideas that take ages -if ever- to materialize.

Meanwhile, there's a huge gap in relation to the realities we know.

The structure of the space itself often feels exclusionary. From the language barriers that isolate non Spanish speaking participants,

to the lack of clarity around how to engage or bring concrete demands from our communities, it becomes hard to know where and how to participate meaningfully.

The fact that major decisions on the outcomes have already been taken before even entering the space makes it feel performative and even staged. There's an anxiety that lingers: are the people closest to the challenges being supported and heard in ways that allow them to influence decisions? What happens when we return home? Will these discussions translate into anything tangible for the people we work alongside? Will this be another list of recommendations that doesn't quite reach our communities?

If these spaces are to matter, they must be reimaged with those who are absent in mind. Not just invited, but centred. Not just heard, but responded to.

# WHAT NOW?



In the aftermath of the Conference, we seem to have more to reflect on than reasons to celebrate. When we look at the [outcome document](#) alone, it's easy to celebrate the Tlatelolco Commitment as a political declaration that is progressive and has strong language on care economies, naming access to health access to education and justice, recognizing the gendered impacts of climate change, among other wins, even in the face of conservative values winning grounds in our region, but it's lacking concrete commitments, indicators and a clear path on how we will achieve the so called Society of Care, because let's not forget that we cannot stay in narratives. Our communities need action. Our communities deserve more than just words that never become realities.

As feminists, we must not settle for mere demonstrations without political will. It is, therefore, more relevant than ever for us to be in these spaces, not holding the line on empty words, but challenging their logic, their performative nature, asking for more space for all of us and pushing for governments, multilateral institutions and ourselves to commit to thinking beyond the words and outside the building. We must continue to show up to bring about real and measurable change.

The Tlatelolco Commitment adds little to what we had already with the [Buenos Aires Commitment](#); it was a rerun of what we had, a very costly and empty protocol. These two regions need financial investment and a clear pathway for concrete actions. Will Colombia give us that at the next Regional Conference on Women? We need to start working on it from today by holding our representatives accountable now.