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REALIZING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

FROM PROMISES TO PROGRESS:

Unlocking System Change Through Feminist Curiosity and State Accountability

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INTRODUCTION

The High-Level Political Forum is a yearly multilateral space under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), meant to bring together multiple actors contributing to the realization of Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This space is the main global space for Member States of the United Nations to be accountable for the full realization of the SDGs, share learnings, and build collaboration needed to advance these goals. The space also serves a political purpose of reaffirming the commitments made in 2015, and making any additional ones needed to continue advancing the goals.

Each year, a certain group of SDGs are put under revision, and the main conversations happen around them while still acknowledging that the SDGs are interconnected. This year, 2026, the HLPF happened from July 6th to July 15th in New York, with the review of SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 17 (Partnerships and Means of Implementation).

As every year, Member States are invited to present Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to showcase how the implementation of the SDGs is going in their countries. These Reviews are presented at the plenary session of the HLPF in a section that is supposed to be a space for countries and other stakeholders to ask questions, share learnings, and to create collaboration. Nonetheless, this exercise is usually a political stunt, where countries mainly speak about the little progress they have made, without acknowledging the current challenges and setbacks.

This is why, as RESURJ, we see an opportunity to engage with this process by making sure these spaces are actually working as accountability mechanisms through asking questions and offering a counter report on what challenges still persist on the ground. Through our participation, we want to assure that our realities are not disregarded in the name of a progress that only exists on paper, and is so far removed from what life looks like in most of our countries from the Global South, where we are still struggling to advance the SDG implementation. We're there not just to challenge our own governments, but also to shed light on the many barriers that make it hard, or even impossible, for real progress to come by, such as the unfair international financing system, the multiple human-made humanitarian crises, and the neocolonial structures that persist to this day, which often go unnoticed in these spaces.

In 2026, 36 countries raised their hand and volunteered to present their VNRs, out of which, most were from the Global South. To this end, we decided to participate in this forum with two main purposes in mind: 1) to continue strengthening younger feminist advocacy efforts in advancing the SDGs nationally, and 2) to continue expanding our work in bridging the gap between the development agenda and the sexual and reproductive justice framework.

This document is a summary of the experiences of RESURJ members and allies who participated in the space. More than offering a traditional report of what happened and what we did, it is a joint effort to try to open the conversation as to how we can still occupy these spaces in a way that is meaningful in our own terms.

“What does introducing feminist principles look like in spaces that don't know what feminism is, or that reject it outright because of how patriarchal propaganda has painted it? I left HLPF thinking less about what I didn't get to say and more about who gets left out of the room before it even opens.”

- Kalifa Facey

IMAGINING POSSIBILITIES IN ORGANIZING

By Laura Valenciano Arrieta

The HLPF remains an important advocacy space. It gives civil society room to intervene, question, and monitor what States report through their Voluntary National Reviews (VNR). It is not a perfect space. But it is still a space we can use.

The Major Groups and other Stakeholder groups are an important part of this. Each group has its own way of organizing and working, recognizing that there are differences in access, strategy, and capacity. Still, there are openings. We can intervene on the floor, we can shape statements, we can organize side events and we can build alliances across movements and constituencies. None of this is enough on its own, but these interventions matter. They keep feminist and civil society voices present in spaces where States continue to make decisions about our lives.

For me, one of the most valuable moments of this year's HLPF happened outside the official programme. It was our weekend meeting with the Women's Major Group. We came together to strategize, but also to sit with a difficult question: what happens after 2030?

The truth is uncomfortable. We may reach 2030 without having achieved the goals we fought for. We may arrive to that date with more unfinished work than we want to admit. We may also face an even harsher political landscape for women's rights, gender justice, and human rights: that States shifted away from the 2030 Agenda altogether, disregarding the prior commitments. We allowed ourselves to imagine those possibilities and to sit with them.

But there was power in facing that discomfort together. We were not trying to manufacture optimism. We were trying to prepare. To think politically. To ask what we will defend, what we will build, and what strategies we will need when the old frameworks no longer hold.

It felt, at times, like a doomsday exercise. But there was power in facing that discomfort together. We were not trying to manufacture optimism. We were trying to prepare. To think politically. To ask what we will defend, what we will build, and what strategies we will need when the old frameworks no longer hold. And there was something else that stayed with me: that made it all feel less lonely.

IMAGINING POSSIBILITIES IN ORGANIZING

By Laura Valenciano Arrieta

I was surrounded by women's rights activists who are carrying so much of the invisible and unpaid labor of keeping gender justice on the agenda. The advocacy. The organizing. The resistance. The care work. The constant work of naming what is being erased and refusing to let it disappear.

That labor is often silent. It should not be.

Perhaps this is also what feminist spaces give us. Not certainty. Not easy answers. But a place to think together, to strategize, to name our fears, and to remind each other that we are not carrying this work alone.

Whatever comes after 2030, we will need that collective strength.

THE VNRS TELL A PERFECT STORY. REALITY DOES NOT

By Anne Heloise Barbosa do Nascimento

The 2026 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development Goals was an important event to hold member states accountable for their actions. It was also a space for the feminist civil society to strategize post-2030 visions. Even if these opportunities are relevant, there is still much more that could be done.

The Voluntary National Reviews submitted by member states had one characteristic that united them all, despite each country's unique circumstances: the VNRs paint a picture of a perfect world, where implementation is moving forward and progress is being made, but they fail to highlight specific cases and violations. For example, the Brazilian VNR consistently highlights the progress achieved in recovering from the erosion of public policies and weakening of democratic institutions that came with the far-right regime; however, it misses an opportunity to bring up, for instance, the Quilombolas of Alcântara v. Brazil case, in which the country was sentenced for the 19th time by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2025. In that case, the construction and expansion of the Alcântara Space Center forced traditional communities off their lands without proper consultation or compensation.

Along the same lines, the country is heading toward its 22nd conviction in this international court with the Belo Monte case, which is pending before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This case details violations that affected traditional peoples in the state of Pará due to the construction and operation of a large hydroelectric plant.

"When it comes to water and sanitation, I think of Claremont and Hanover, the Jamaican communities where I grew up, which only got piped water in recent years, and what that gap costs the women and girls who manage it daily. When it takes up tourism and farming losses after Hurricane Melissa, I think of my mother, who works in tourism, and what a slow season or a hotel closure actually does to a household."
- Kalifa Facey

THE VNRS TELL A PERFECT STORY. REALITY DOES NOT

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VNR reports could be better utilized to respond to these cases that are already being addressed at the international level and that are related to the SDGs under discussion. This would give the reports greater substance, strengthening their credibility, transparency, and its ideal of accountability to the global human rights system, civil society, and ultimately, to the people on the ground.

By remaining silent on specific cases, member states place the responsibility on civil society to raise these points in their statements, which does not always happen, since the time allotted for statements by this group is limited to 1 minute and 30 seconds. This benefits member states and helps them appear as "good guys" in the face of pressure exerted by the UN and other stakeholders.

"Different countries, different governments, different levels of resourcing, but when it came down to it, we were all worried about the same thing: The lack of accountability and transparency in how women's rights get legislated, funded, and then quietly deprioritized." - Kalifa Facey

Despite all this, the 2026 HLPF stood out for showcasing a civil society that, although it has seen better days in terms of the forum's effectiveness, remains aligned with and committed to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In this regard, major groups and better-resourced organizations brought young activists from the Global South to carry out their advocacy efforts and demand their rights from their own countries and allied member states, whether through interventions during VNR presentations or in bilateral meetings.

The events, workshops, and civil society gatherings reflected a spirit of solidarity, camaraderie, and the exchange of information necessary to confront times marked by the rise of an anti-rights agenda. Under these circumstances, networking is essential given the potential for future collaborations among activists and organizations around the globe.

In light of all this, it is clear that multilateralism remains a space capable of facilitating the reporting of abuses, the strengthening of rights, and even the creation of new ones, but progress needs to be made not only at the narrative level, but in lived experiences around the world. In times of the rise of the global far right, HLPF is a space that must be strengthened and occupied by actors capable of promoting and taking responsibility for the human rights agenda, not only by showcasing our wins, but by flagging what still needs to be done. I believe it is our role as young people to do exactly that.

THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DEMANDS MORE THAN COMMITMENTS

By Rabeb Aloui

I arrived at the 2026 HLPF with the expectation of seeing renewed political ambition; instead, I found myself reflecting on the widening gap between the language of commitment and the reality of implementation. One of the biggest challenges that stood out throughout the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) was the persistent disconnect between reporting and accountability. Many countries presented impressive achievements, highlighted reforms and shared success stories. These efforts deserve recognition, but too often the VNR process remains an exercise in showcasing progress rather than critically assessing what is not working. There is still little political incentive to openly discuss policy failures, structural inequalities or implementation gaps. Without this level of honesty, the VNR becomes a communication exercise rather than a genuine tool for learning and accountability.

Tunisia's VNR illustrated this challenge. While it reaffirmed the country's commitment to the 2030 Agenda and highlighted legislative and institutional progress, significant gaps remained insufficiently addressed. During my intervention on behalf of the Women's Major Group and NGOs, I stressed that gender equality cannot be measured only through legal reforms. Women's equal access to land, productive resources and economic opportunities, particularly for rural women, remains inadequately documented. Data gaps continue to obscure the lived realities of women facing intersecting forms of discrimination. This is not unique to Tunisia. Across several VNRs, I observed that gender was frequently acknowledged as a cross-cutting priority, yet rarely integrated into discussions on economic transformation, climate adaptation, food systems or financing. Gender equality continues to be treated as a standalone objective instead of a political lens shaping every Sustainable Development Goal.

Another striking observation was the absence of serious conversations on the structural barriers preventing countries, particularly in the Global South, from delivering on the SDGs. Governments repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to implementation while overlooking the shrinking fiscal space caused by debt burdens, unequal global financial systems and growing climate impacts. We cannot continue discussing sustainable development without addressing the financial architecture that constrains national action. Countries facing rising debt repayments, recurrent climate shocks and declining development assistance cannot realistically accelerate SDG implementation through political will alone. The discussion must move beyond mobilizing additional resources toward reforming the systems that determine who has access to those resources and under what conditions.

What also felt missing was a stronger recognition of civic space and meaningful participation. Civil society was present throughout HLPF, but too often our role remained consultative rather than transformative. The value of civil society does not lie in validating government reports but in bringing forward perspectives that official narratives frequently overlook. Women's organizations, youth movements, Indigenous Peoples, migrants and communities affected by climate change are often the first to identify implementation gaps and propose practical solutions. However, these voices continue to struggle for equal recognition within multilateral processes.

"Jamaica's VNR does not mention LGBTQ individuals. I sat with real confusion about how to advocate for LGBTQ rights on that stage, and I still haven't fully worked through it. These rights are criminalized in Jamaica, and raising them publicly, in that room, could do more harm than good if it isn't handled with care. It's not lost on me either that I'm a lesbian woman doing this work in a country where my own identity is still criminalized, so the caution isn't abstract; it's personal." - Kalifa Facey

Despite these frustrations, there were moments that gave me hope.

I was inspired by feminist advocates from every region who consistently challenged comfortable narratives and insisted that governments answer difficult questions. Rather than accepting broad political declarations, they demanded evidence, accountability and measurable commitments. Advocacy should not be measured by the number of meetings attended or diplomatic statements delivered, but by our willingness to raise uncomfortable questions that institutions often prefer to avoid.

Looking ahead, I believe the future of sustainable development cannot simply be an extension of the current model. As we approach 2030 and discussions begin on what comes next, we have an opportunity to rethink not only our priorities but also the way decisions are made. Sustainable development must become more democratic, more feminist and more locally driven. Communities should not merely participate in implementation; they should help define priorities, shape policies and monitor progress. National reporting must become more transparent, supported by disaggregated data, independent review mechanisms and meaningful civil society engagement throughout the process rather than only during consultation periods.

We also need to recognize that gender equality is an economic, environmental and governance issue. Climate adaptation will fail without women's leadership. Food security cannot be achieved while rural women lack secure land rights. Digital transformation will deepen inequalities unless women and girls have equal access to technology and decision-making. Every SDG depends on dismantling structural discrimination, not simply acknowledging it.

Finally, HLPF reminded me that progress requires courage. Courage from governments to acknowledge where they are falling short, courage from civil society to move beyond symbolic participation and demand accountability and courage from the international community to confront the inequalities embedded within global governance and financing systems.

"Out of my comfort zone in some ways, exactly where I needed to be in others, young in the room but not new to this fight. I came back with more questions than I left with, and I think that's exactly right."
- Kalifa Facey

BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL: THE ROAD TO 2027

By Sara Martínez Cabello

As the High Level Political Forum of 2026 came to an end, with exhaustion and an equally heavy feeling of hope and despair, my mind has led me again and again to the same questions: what is our role as civil society in these spaces, particularly coming from the Global South?

When deciding to come to these spaces, we usually frame our work in terms of "doing advocacy", which in reality can mean a myriad of different things. Some consider advocacy just to occupy the spaces that were difficult to win in the first place; others consider that doing advocacy is talking to governments alone, finding ground to position their messaging, or occupying spaces in fancy panels with diplomats. Although these are tactics that can bring about valuable outcomes for some, there is only one thought in my head: this system is not designed for us, and the more we try to fit in and try to uphold it instead of transform it, the more we are giving away to power.

I genuinely believe that the sooner we get this in our heads, the easier it will be for us to reformulate our strategies so that we're not settling for crumbs from the system and calling them wins, but so that we are shaking the system and pushing for its transformation.

This is exactly what my fierce feminist allies have taught me while attending HLPF. From watching them be outspoken, say their names and the names of their people, name their struggles, and ask hard questions at the plenary sessions and VNR presentations, I have learnt that our role in those spaces is to disturb, to make the flaws in the system stand out and demand meaningful transformation to overcome them. We are not there to settle for minimal language wins in often useless agreed conclusions, or perfectly crafted responses that have no translation to policies or material change on the ground. We are the ones to sustain our little gains, not by settling for them, but by asking for more. This is particularly relevant in the current context that wishes to mute us down and dismantle our wins.

For years, in my region, we have seen authoritarian governments, right-wing parties, and anti-rights actors attack the 2030 Agenda, calling the SDGs "woke", "socialist", or a "globalist imposition that threatens national sovereignty". We saw this explicitly in Javier Milei's speeches at the UN General Assembly and in recent statements from figures like Laura Fernández in Costa Rica or Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. What makes these narratives so insidious is not that they offer genuine solutions, but that they weaponize and co-opt real Global South grievances to advance their anti-rights agendas.

These actors take real, structural problems, such as how Global South countries are choked by debt, or how multilateral promises have failed to change daily material conditions, and cynically redirect the blame. They do not attack the Agenda because they care about sovereignty or economic justice for our peoples, but because they are looking to escape international accountability, so they can keep violating basic human rights. The failure of Agenda 2030 to deliver material change is not because human rights or social development agendas are "dangerous," but because country-level implementation remains severely undermined by political neglect and a predatory global financing model built on IMF loans and debt traps. Far-right actors exploit these systemic failures and build narratives that help them tear down systems that are inconvenient for them.

In 2025, the 2030 Agenda missed something crucial in its efforts to reach consensus: you cannot transform societies by perpetuating systems of oppression. By depending on neocolonial financing methods, Global North-Global South dependency relationships were reinforced under the premise of "reducing the divide." The problem is not the vision of human rights or gender equality; the problem is the broken capitalist, neoliberal system underpinning its delivery. This is why, as feminists, we must expose how anti-rights forces co-opt these flaws for their own agendas, while we demand a completely different financing system that eliminates debt dependency and centers the true economic sovereignty of our peoples without giving "big economies", oligarchs, and "think-they-know-it-all technocrats" the power to strangle us.

So yes, Agenda 2030 is fundamentally constrained because it operates within a broken system, but that does not make human rights or sustainability the enemy. Showing up to occupy these spaces requires the willingness to expose how anti-rights actors co-opt legitimate critiques, transform the systems disabling our progress, and possess the courage to name what is actually wrong. We must show up loudly, reclaiming our voices and our power.
As the timeline to achieve the SDGs comes to an end and UN Member States prepare to evaluate the 2030 Agenda alongside the UN80 initiative to reform the UN, we must remind ourselves that holding on to old language red lines and "holding on to our wins" is no longer enough.

Moving toward the 2027 negotiations, we cannot afford a "business as usual" approach; we must demand radical, systemic change. This requires more of us to be outspoken, comfortable letting go of diplomatic lingo and "good forms", and ready to transform the system in our favor before anti-rights forces co-opt and dismantle multilateralism to fulfill their own perverse agendas, using the very tools that civil society fought to create.

OUR COLLECTIVE VISION FOR 2027 AND BEYOND

As we move into 2027, where negotiations to define the future of the SDGs beyond 2030 will commence, we must organize to change the focus to where it belongs. We must push ourselves, Member States, philanthropies, and others to shift decisively from commitments to implementation, accountability and real structural change.

This will require us to be creative, strategic, to act collectively to be architects, not merely consultants, of a multilateral system that is built to truly respond to the needs and wants of women and girls, to be grounded in the lived realities of all people, particularly those facing intersecting forms of inequality and marginalisation. We must be smart, vocal and brave to name, confront and dismantle the structural conditions that continue to undermine the SDGs. This is an invitation for us to move beyond speeches and occupying seats in fancy tables, but to be driven by real action that is bold, refreshing, and can actually drive change.

We must demand and secure predictable and accessible financing, we shall occupy the spaces that we have demanded for so long in a way that is strategic for our collective goals, so that our participation is actually meaningful and we can, not only influence, but be part of decision-making. We must move beyond asking for permission to be at the table, but making our realities visible, by placing gender justice at the centre of political and economic priorities. We won't settle for representation: what we want is a full reform, guided by feminist principles.

2027 must be a year of action, redistribution and accountability; not another year of empty promises.

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