

At a global forum of feminists, one thing is clear: it's where you live that counts

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The Guardian

Some 1,800 activists from radically different backgrounds at the Association for Women's Rights in Development conference in Brazil tried to find common ground at a moment in history when women's rights are being chipped away.

There was a telling moment at last week's women's rights forum in Brazil when, in a rallying call, one of the speakers called out: "What do we want?" The reply was a low mumble of confusion.

It was clear that expecting 1,800 women's and transgender rights activists from 120 countries to align on one answer was a huge ask. They campaign on such a diverse range of issues – from sexual and reproductive health, environmental justice and better employment, to peace, sex workers and political freedoms.

The forum, organised by the [Association for Women's Rights in Development](#) (Awid), in the tropical state of Bahia, in Brazil's north-east, didn't explicitly set out to answer that question, or to define a common agenda. But the event was an attempt to coalesce and drive momentum for the feminist movement.

It is no easy task. One constant complaint among feminists in poorer countries is that their needs are less likely to be heard than those of women in more privileged settings.

"In terms of the women's movement or feminist agenda, we feel that at times we are a bit let down by developed countries," said Emma Kaliya, from Malawi, chair of the board of the [African Women's Development and Communication Network](#). "When you come to a conference like this you want to see how we are going to address the challenges that specific countries are facing.

"In my country, people believe that you can't have full realisation of certain rights if you live in abject poverty, if the whole issue of livelihoods is not addressed ... Those issues are not coming out."

There has been much for feminists to celebrate over the past few decades. [Women](#) have more freedoms to earn money, get educated, choose when and if they want to marry and have children.

Ending violence against women and girls, for example, is now [high on the agenda](#) at national and international level. Forty years ago, things were very different, as [Charlotte Bunch](#), founding director of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, told the forum: "If you tried to talk

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about it in the 1970s, you were told it's not an issue. It was a private matter. Human rights organisations said it was not a human rights issue."

The historic [Beijing Platform for Action](#), agreed at the fourth world conference on women in 1995, did much to solidify the calls for change, with demands for structural change to end gender inequality.

But the backlash against women's rights has been brutal. Religious fundamentalism and a rise of rightwing conservative groups, particularly over the past 15 years and most notably in the Middle East and Latin America, has left women fighting to retain the very ground they've worked so hard to claim.

The resistance from governments that would rather women stick to traditional roles in the home, producing children on demand, is all too familiar to anyone who attends the [Commission on the Status of Women](#) at the UN, the annual meeting for member states to assess progress towards gender equality.

What has become clear is that the extent of change for women is largely dependent on where they live, their class and their race. A poor woman from a rural area of Niger, for example, will be among the last to see any real gains.

"We are all in different sites of struggle and all making significant impact no matter how small, local that may feel," said Hakima Abbas, Awid's director of programmes, who will take over as joint-executive director of the organisation from January. "The fact you can be in a room like this [at the forum] and have so much diversity and still all be connected ... that means we are chipping away at the wall."

However, she warned that if we don't engage with one another, "I don't think there is much of a future for the movement." There is so much to gain if we start talking, she added.

One organisation that is attempting to engage is [Resurj](#), a global alliance of young feminists. Members are already exploring ways to collaborate and better understand the needs of women in different places.

"What we're trying to do is go back to the power of storytelling. We need to be able to hear about concrete experiences," said Resurj member Sinara Gumieri, a researcher and a legal advisor at [Anis](#), the Institute of Bioethics, Human Rights and Gender in Brazil.

"We can't be naive [enough] to think we are the first to do this. Movements for decades have developed the language we need ... and ways to connect. We're not doing anything new, but we're very aware now that this is the way forward."

That desire to work more closely together is the "most important thing that will come out of the forum", said Ani Hao, a research consultant and founder of Agora Juntas, a hub for feminists in Rio de Janeiro. "What will determine

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whether feminist movements evolve, strengthen and work more closely together is if they connect their issues.”

The executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, believes all women have a role to play to effect change but society needs to change first. “We have tried so hard to fit into the world order, but patriarchy is not constructed as an enabler,” she said. “It has to be about changing society so women are not trying to fit into a broken society. Society has to be better constructed.”

Greater tolerance and respect within the feminist movement are also required.

[Tiffany Mugo, a black, bisexual, feminist activist living in South Africa](#), said she has been criticised by other women for pandering to patriarchy because she’s “not lesbian enough”. “The central message of smashing patriarchy in the face is the easiest message,” she said. “But maybe we need to support doing it in different ways. That’s where we need to get to.”

Over the four days of the conference, it became clear why the question of what women want was so hard to answer. It depends on who you are, where you live and, probably, which stage of life you’re at.

“We don’t have all the answers, but we are here and we are celebrating and affirming our own choices around feminism,” said Abbas. “And we can do that with respect for one another.”