



Youth in Action: Connecting activism across regions and movements

*"There are words that have stayed with me, not necessarily about SRHR but about **conscience, care, and community**. "Do it with love" is one of them, and it seems valuable to continue to **bring love to places where we talk about violence and oppression**. Love is an energy of **resistance and struggle** and it can be the key to the **continuity of our efforts**." - Participant quoting Debbie Owusu-Akeeyah*

Overview

For a third year, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights gathered **26 advocates** from Turtle Island and [Abya Yala](#) (or the regions we know, respectively, as Canada and Latin America) to exchange knowledge and share experiences. This year's forum focused on three areas as they intersect with **sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): climate, drug policy, and migration**. This report is a **written account** of the event's activities and key learnings. It centralizes the concept of **bodily autonomy** and the value of **lived and living experience** as crucial bonds between experiences of advocacy across movements.

The Forum

Over five days, the youth activists **exchanged and co-created knowledge**, drawing from the diversity of their life histories, emotions surrounding advocacy, and **shared commitment to building and strengthening cross-movement and cross-regional activism**.

The Forum featured three virtual seminars on the selected issues, aiming to facilitate an **open, intimate, and horizontal conversation among peers**. Each seminar included advocates with lived experience and activism backgrounds in the selected issues as well as SRHR advocates with an interest in strengthening their understanding of the motivations, demands, and tactics of other movements. The Forum also featured plenary sessions and workshops led by SRHR activists. In these spaces, participants brought forward and exchanged learnings from the three seminars and advanced their knowledge of strategies for practicing solidarity.

Download a printable zine about the experiences we had at the forum [here](#).



What did participants take away from the forum?

The Forum aimed to **deepen connections between rights movements across regions**, broaden participant knowledge of **intersectional feminist strategies** for defending and advancing rights, and establish **SRHR as central to other rights issues and the lives of everyone, everywhere**.

“We sowed the seeds of our intention, shared and valued our truth, dreamed of what we want to build and how to make it happen. It has been **magical and real at the same time...** Although we have discussed harsh topics of **pain and injustice, we have done so with love.**” - Survey respondent

“The importance of intersectionality in understanding our struggles, being aware of **how different oppressions and inequalities affect us**, being **empathetic** and sensitive, **supporting one another, sustaining one another**, not invalidating other struggles, and **listening to what others have to tell us.**” - Survey respondent

“It's nice to meet people who have similar experiences, it makes you realize that **the struggle takes place in different places and that you are not alone.**” - Survey respondent

“[For me,] the most important takeaway is **how non-extractive the space feels when we come together to share our knowledge.**” - Survey respondent

Our bodies, our territories

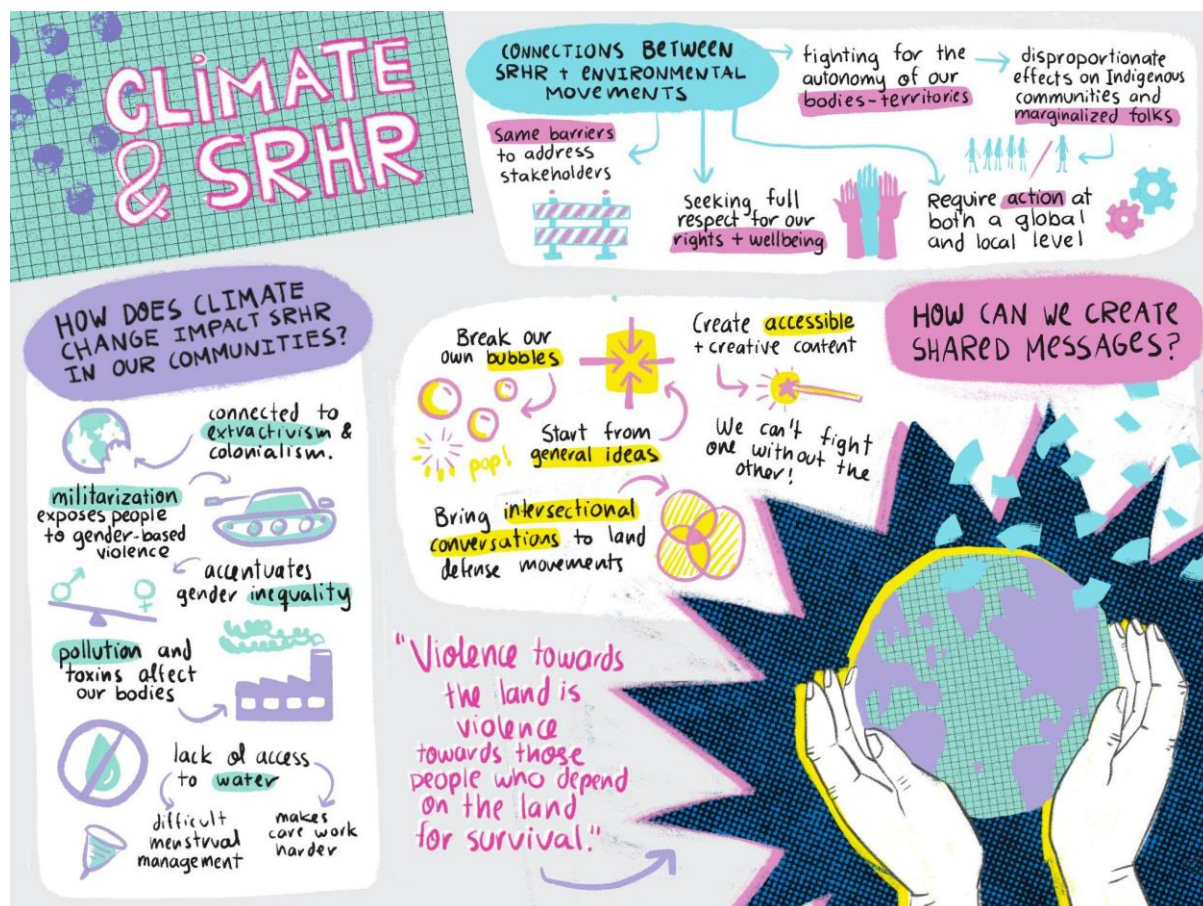
“...as youth we are seeking profound changes that involve our bodies, our lives, and our territories.” - Participant

The first seminar centered on climate change and its connections with SRHR. Participants exchanged perspectives on the impacts of climate change in their contexts, recognizing that in the Global South this comes with an additional layer of environmental and human impacts, including violence fueled by extractivist industries. Participants agreed that **the climate crisis is a symptom of violent and unequal systems and structures.** As the environment in which we live influences our bodies, violence against the land requires violence against the people that inhabit it. Like violations to sexual and reproductive rights, the climate crisis is **rooted in patriarchal and racist systems of oppression.**

SRHR and climate movements share a number of **common goals**, including that of physical security and wellbeing. In particular, land defenders and SRHR activists both

seek the fulfillment of rights connected to bodily autonomy and reproductive justice. In both areas, the impact on and resistance of Indigenous people was highlighted.

Strategies to improve the enjoyment of rights must acknowledge that climate justice and SRHR movements fight against the same systems of oppression. Participants emphasized that advocates need to **build a congruent and articulated voice across social movements** that promotes systemic solutions from an intersectional perspective.



*Inside the climate movement, it is often hard to confront patriarchal messages. **We cannot defend our territory if we do not address all forms of violence, including [those that limit] women's bodily autonomy.** I believe **the movement cannot succeed if we do not address this lack of congruency.** It is important to think about intersectionality and begin to understand that we fight for the same things. - Mitzu Cortés*

*Something that catches my attention [between movements] is that we all work for the same goal: stopping rights violations. In the end, **both fights are human and require regional and global articulation, and current economic, political and social crises***

make it even more relevant to create an alliance between activists. - María René Tapia

*[The conversation reminded me of] the **traditional medicines** we use to help with abortion, pregnancy, menstrual pains, etc., and how those **plants are often destroyed** by infrastructure; development is often not done with the consent of local Indigenous groups.* - James Schlonies

Vindicating pleasure

During the seminar on drug policy activism and its intersections with SRHR, participants identified that both movements advocate for **autonomous decision-making about one's body and life**. The conversation also highlighted that many **systems of oppression use discipline** as a tool and that this is particularly evident as it applies to drug use and reproductive choice.

In contrast to many other rights issues, conversations related to **sex, sex work, and drugs are heavily moralized**. Often, policies around both **infantilize and criminalize people, and contribute to greater risks**. In both regional contexts, the harms of criminalization are not equally exerted, but target and impact racialized, poor, and otherwise marginalized people. The concept and practice of harm-reduction is fundamentally important in both spheres.

SRHR and drug policy activists struggle with similar challenges related to information-sharing and messaging. Much of the narrative around drug use and sex is dominated by a focus on risk and ignores the functions and motivations behind both. Both must challenge the idea that the provision of resources, tools, and information encourages "harmful" or "risky" behaviour.

The frameworks that regulate or prohibit activities or define norms generally **ignore the role of pleasure, fun, and community**. Speakers agreed on the need to further explore the role of pleasure in our advocacy.

Participants also exchanged perspectives on their differing regional contexts in Canada and Latin America, as well as exploring the geopolitical dimensions of drug policy.

We also see that within and across regions, progress on SRHR and drug policy reform has been led by those with intimate experience in both. The session closed with

acknowledgements that **lived experiences are valuable and must be at the centre** of conversations about these issues, in all realms.



The problem here is that **discourse on who the problematic people are almost always imagines them as those most marginalized**. We hyper-fixate on this idea of poor/working class consumption, and upper-middle class use is not discussed or is ignored. I think **it produces certain ways of thinking and talking about these topics**, whether it is stuff around forced sterilization or access to various risk reduction supplies, and who those things are targeted at. - Alexander Betsos

I'm a daily user. I work three jobs and I'm able to function perfectly fine. But **because of its demonization so badly, many people don't want to look at me. They assume I'm violent** or going to rob you. I have never done that. I have ADHD and don't have access to medication. It helps me function every day and be able to get up and go to work. **We get to decide whether we want to do that, it is not the policymaker's choice, it is ours**. - Kali-olt Sedgemore

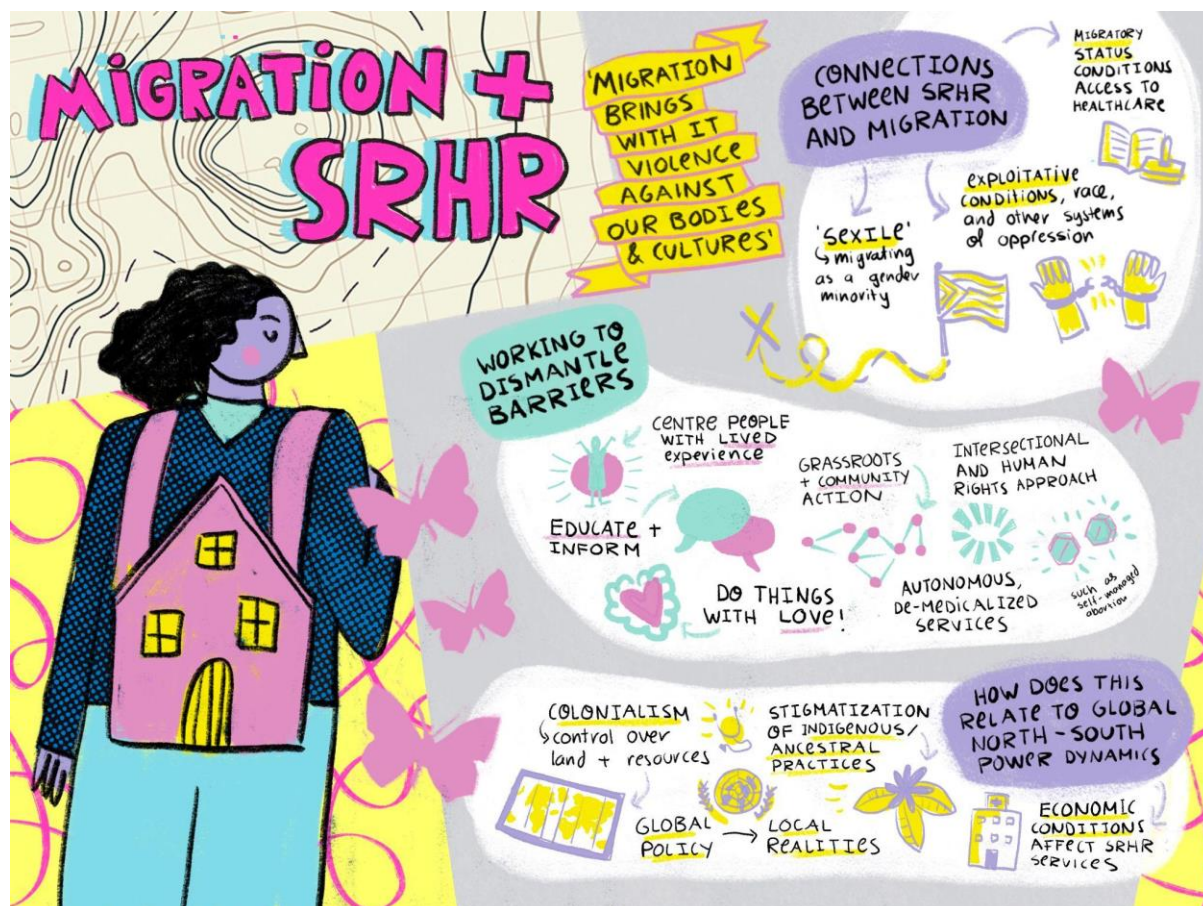
Migration, 'sexile,' and love

The third seminar explored the links between migration and SRHR. The session applied an intersectional lens, highlighting the **plurality of motivations for migration and experiences of migrating**.

Drawing from personal experience, participants highlighted the **experience of sexual and gender diversity** as one key area of intersection between migration and SRHR. One participant introduced the concept of **'sexile'** (forced displacement based on discrimination and oppression related to one's gender identity or sexual orientation). In particular, non-binary and trans people **experience distinct marginalization that can lead them to migrate** and which informs their initial motivations, experience of navigating gendered bureaucracies, and experiences of settlement.

A key insight was that the main actions aimed at addressing vulnerabilities related to migration come from grassroots and community efforts. The **youth advocates vouched for solutions promoting autonomous de-medicalized services** and affirming locale-specific and Indigenous knowledge.

The participants took time to recognize the **emotional context of activism**, which is often overlooked. They shared experiences around the **difficulties of working in unjust and sometimes violent contexts** and took a moment to acknowledge the value of fighting pain by building projects with and from love.



For trans people **talking about borders and SRHR is hard**. In Venezuela, **trans identities are criminalized and trans people face violence and murder** so speaking about identity is difficult, and thinking about SRHR is impossible. It was after I immigrated that I understood that I had sexual rights. There is a lack of information regarding SRHR because of [the marginalization and violence] that we face. **In such a context, there is no time to think about SRHR.** - Valentinna Rangel

There is also this added nuance of cross-cultural understanding... Upon my abortion visit, **no communication was culturally relevant**. There can be a great deal of shame to sort through. It was a very scientific procedure. For a lot of communities, this can be inherently harmful. Depending on the municipality, city, province, etc. you live in, our education system heavily relies on parents to do a lot of the teaching and to create the space for questions, which is often not an accessible reality. Comprehensive sex education is so important to **increase access to our sexual and reproductive rights, and to mitigate harms emphasized by prevalent stigmatization.** - Elaheh Sajadi

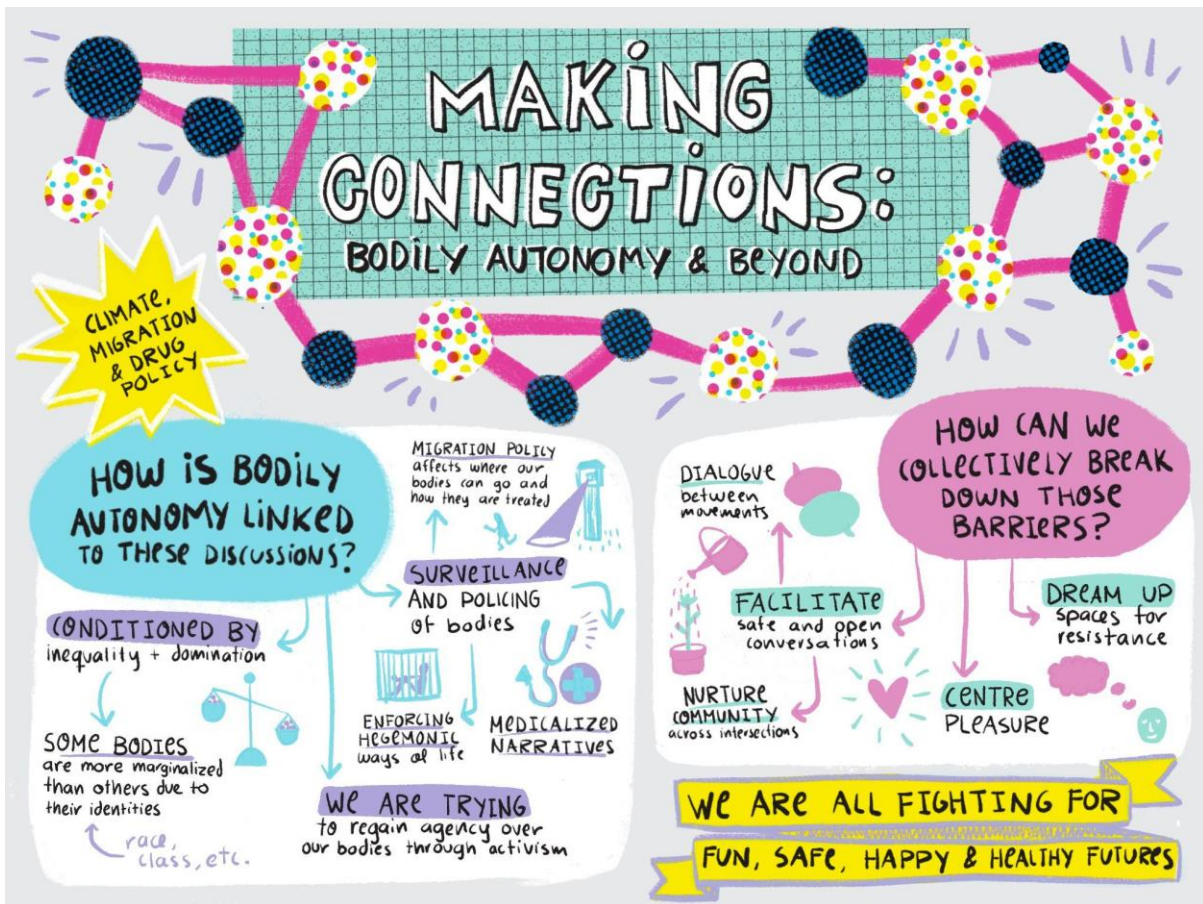
We need to learn how to support each other in moments where we're afraid, and when we don't know what is happening... I think that from there we can learn to construct, reconstruct, or deconstruct what we do not need and what we do need, as a community. - Alessandra Nakano

Making connections

Participants emphasized that **autonomy is at the core of many rights movements across the region**. This **includes and extends beyond the concept of bodily autonomy**. Climate change, drug policy, migration, and SRHR are all influenced by similar power dynamics and advocates are driven by **similar motivations and visions for the future**. These play out locally, regionally, and globally, and we have lots to learn from our friends and colleagues in allied movements.

The activities of the Forum **encouraged participants to share concrete strategies to advocate for the fulfillment of rights** in their regions and co-create knowledge informed by their varied experiences. Participants agreed that **SRHR is central to all rights issues** and that it needs to be addressed through community action that is sustained and supported.

A highlight of the forum was the opportunity for connections between participants, and their many **expressions of solidarity, recognition, and support** for one another. These are bonds that participants can continue to nourish to **create and strengthen their advocacy networks**.



*Every time I come to these spaces, I understand **how important it is to create a community that goes beyond borders** and finds how the same struggles connect us. And continuing a friendship from last year's event to this year's has opened my eyes a lot to how our struggles go hand-in-hand, and how important it is that these spaces are created.* - Roland

*We need to articulate into a common effort because talking about SRHR implies building a community. **As advocates, we need to create trust and build a connection between people.** We have powerful spaces of resistance but they are not sufficient, and we do not want to lose the power of this Forum. That is why we needed interconnected spaces, [and that] pushes me forward and gives me hope.* - Mary Pacheco

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